



in our own words

black and minority ethnic ministers
of the United Reformed Church
write their own stories

edited by

Michael N. Jagessar

in our own words is a collection of stories from minority ethnic ministers, church related community workers and ministers in training of the United Reformed Church. The authors worked on the premise that their contribution will be reflective, while documenting their own personal stories as visible minority ethnic members of the United Reformed Church. Contributions include some biographical information, work in what used to be “home context”, why the UK and the United Reformed Church, and each writer’s journey in the United Reformed Church. The stories vary in their richness, style, and manifestation of faith and faithfulness, as should be expected. You will find here God-talk that relies upon God’s generosity; that demonstrates in its weakness and shortcoming, a radical confidence in God; and God-talk that delights in employing mind and heart, spontaneity and imagination – in response to the offer of full life for all.

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Printed by imprintdigital
Upton Pyne, Exeter
www.digital.imprint.co.uk

Typesetting and cover design by narrator
www.narrator.me.uk
info@narrator.me.uk
033 022 300 39

First published 2016

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prelude

There are just over thirty-five URC ministers and crews who identify themselves as Black and Asian Minority Ethnic Ministers (BAME). While others may fall into this descriptive category they themselves may not wish to be so identified.

At one of our annual BAME gatherings (2015), we felt the need to write our own faith journeys. There are a number of reasons for this but two will suffice for this prelude. Firstly, it was felt that there is an amazing degree of ignorance about or unwillingness to learn of the experiences and giftings of BAME ministers/crews. This is very often reflected in ways BAME colleagues are totalised as a group and the struggle to get through our Church's 'revolving door' of who gets to be involved in our life together. Secondly, it was strongly felt that since most of our URC publications tend to cater for the dominant 'in-group' of the Church, the possibility of BAME's stories ever making it onto the Church's main narrative looks quite distant. So the decision to write and compile our own stories making these available. For when such a time arrives that our stories would be of interest to those who come after us, it would not be the case of 'others' writing about us.

In this collection, nine (9) of us have started this process, to which others are encouraged to write and share theirs. We worked on the premise that our contributions will be a reflective piece documenting our own personal stories as visible minority ethnic members of the United Reformed Church. The stories necessarily include biographical information, our work in what used to be our 'home context', how we got to the UK and the URC, and our journey in the United Reformed Church.

These stories, titled *In Our Own Words*, vary in their richness, style, and manifestation of faith and faithfulness, as should be expected. They underscore that there are 'many types' of BAME's! And it is not just about us writing our story/history. You will find here God-talk that relies upon God's generosity (grace); that demonstrates in its weakness and shortcoming a radical confidence in God, that can be both confident and joyous, yet self-critical; and God-talk that delights in employing mind and heart, spontaneity and imagination – in response to the offer of full life for all.

I am very grateful for the colleagues who have taken time and given thought to contribute to this collection. They are Mark Robinson, Memon (Mona) Javed, Barnabas Shin, Zaidie Orr, John Danso, Joshua Han, Samuel Silungwe, Karen Campbell, Michael Jagessar. We hope that other BAME colleagues will follow with their own contributions. In editing and formatting the contributions, I have been ably assisted by Tracey Hardingham and Wendy Cooper. We all felt honoured and moved to read these personal stories. We trust that you, the readers, will feel the same.

August 2016



quick access to ‘their own words’

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My Path



Revd. Mark Robinson was born in Battersea London, grew up in Trinidad and Tobago and is now a minister in the SPACE group of churches in West Yorkshire. He is moderator of Churches Together in Dewsbury. He holds a BA (Hons) in Film and Media from University of London; MSc in Marketing from Brunel University and BTh from Cambridge University. He is Chaplain to General Assembly of the United Reformed Church 2016–18. He is married to Tessa, they have four children and two grandchildren.

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”
[Psalm 119:105 NRSV]

snippets from my early life

I have always loved those words from the Psalm quoted above; they have very much been part of my story of journey in search of God moving in the events of my life. I have always had a love of God for reasons that I hope will become clear as this piece progresses. Yet even so I have found that there were times when I have missed the presence of God in my life and in situations I have found myself.

London born

I was born in London in 1960 to Vincentian parents, Richard and Doris Robinson, who were living in the United Kingdom (UK) for a specific period of time. They had come to the UK because my father worked as Assistant Secretary to The West Indies Federation. The federation was made up of ten West Indian territories and was established through a 1956 parliamentary act that sought to establish political union among the ten Caribbean territories. Their hope in coming together was to form one unified independent Caribbean state. At that time the 10 territories were dependent on Britain as colonies and my father's work involved entering into talks to begin the strategic breakaway from Britain. My family remained in the UK until the collapse of movements toward Federation. In 1962 we returned to the Caribbean to live in Trinidad and Tobago which was the capital of the now defunct federation. I was two years old at the time. In the same year, both Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago gained independence from Britain. I spent most of my growing up years in Trinidad with regular trips to St. Vincent and spent a short period living in Barbados.

Christian upbringing

My family have always been very devoted Christians and have, ever since I can remember, been very active in the Methodist church.

My mother would gather her six children around to have regular Bible study sessions, and it is safe to say, that those sessions were not always greeted with joy. More often than not we would have preferred to be doing something we deemed more interesting. She wanted us to have a good grounding in Christian values. Though Bible study was not always what I wanted to do, I will admit that from as far back as I have been aware, I have actively been on a faith journey. At a very early age I had a profound experience which, I believe strongly, was when my call to serve God was first presented. My eldest sister remembers me telling them in no uncertain terms one morning that I believed God wanted me to do something, although I did not know exactly what I was required to do. However, it was not until later in my teenage years that I felt and experienced God calling like never before. I would love to describe my experience fully, but I find that difficult to do. What I can say is; part of that experience involved singing. I heard the beautiful sound of a choir singing and wondered where it was coming from. The choir sang about God's love and about Jesus' death and resurrection, and they called me by name, in song, beckoning me to follow Jesus.

where the call leads

Years later, before I got married, I told my wife (Tessa) that I believed I was called to serve God and her response to me was, 'I would never stand in the way of that'. However, it would be 25 years before I would arrive at a junction on my journey that would lead me to answer the call I had received when I was very young. From 1996 to 2000, we lived with our children in Brazil. While living there, the call grew stronger and, at that time, became very much aware of the everyday social injustices that people were facing. It was easy to see that there was a massive divide between the haves and the have nots in Brazil. And, although my Portuguese was not very good, I was able to communicate and even have good meaningful conversations with people.

It was there that I came face-to-face with actual people on the street, not just situations of injustice, but people who were crying out for justice, fair-play and for God's intervention in their lives. For the most part, they were a spiritual people, many driven to do

God's work. Yet, I could sense a measure of emptiness, of questioning and, amongst those who were homeless, there was hopefulness in the midst of their homelessness. This encounter was in stark contrast to the experience of the people I actually worked with in Brazil. There seemed to be something missing and as I reflected on that, I wondered if that was because even though people would speak to God and about God, they spoke of a God that was distant, not of an accessible God who could be found in their midst.

From my experience of God's word, I knew that God sought a very deep and lasting relationship in the midst of all God's children. And I had an idea of God as reachable – after all I was on a journey and I wanted to understand how I could be of some sort of help. I questioned whether this was perhaps what God was calling me to do. I wondered – was I being positioned to offer something that would help myself and others to develop a deeper, lasting and loving relationship with God? I gave this careful and prayerful consideration, and then came to the decision to begin to seek a way to answer God's call after so many years. After making that decision, I had a strong sense of wanting to go home, surprisingly, not the home I had come to know and love in the Caribbean, but the home of my birth (even though I had only lived in the UK very briefly when I was in my 20s since leaving at the age of two). I was 40 years old by the time I decided to return home even though I cannot call the UK home in any genuine way. I think that, for this reason, I do not have a sense of belonging because I am always seen as 'other'.

*back to Britain and
welcome in the URC*

So, in 2000 I travelled to the UK, hoping finally to do what I believed was God's Will. Of course, I did not know what to expect. I thought I would embark on a course of study that would give me the tools



I would need to do what I felt I was being called to do. Instead life happened and I embarked on a different course of studies which involved Film, Media, and Marketing. I wondered if I was deviating from the path God was leading me along or was this all in keeping with God's leading.

It was not long after I arrived in the UK from Brazil that I discovered St. Andrew's URC, and their well-loved minister at the time. St. Andrew's was a progressive church that was engaged in a significant amount of outreach in a predominantly Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) community with youth, the elderly, infants and young adults. The church hosted regular councillor surgeries, annual memorial services to honour those who died in the New Cross fire. It was a church that was embedded in community and served the area well and I was ready to get involved.

I came to the church as a complete stranger, and found a love and acceptance that was heart-warming. I had found a true Christian welcome there, and a home at St. Andrew's. So I started helping with the after school club, and the youth group, and assisting the minister in whatever ways were useful to advancing God's work in the area. At that time, many of the young people in the youth club were experiencing problems with police and at home, and the youth club offered a place that they could call their very own. I felt moved to work with them and stuck it out even when this was proving to be trying.

an unexpected turn and more prayers

In 2002, I confided in my minister about my call to ministry and he told me that he and others at St. Andrew's had already detected it. After some conversations, I was about to embark on a serious and definitive path to attend to my call. But that was not to be because, soon after that decision was reached, I was diagnosed with sclerosing B-cell lymphoma, which, I was told, is a rare form of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. I remember the doctor calling Tessa and me in to give us the prognosis – it was not good.

So instead of embarking on the path testing my call, I was fully on a painful path of medical testing and one that would prove to be a painful yet spiritually strengthening one for my children, my wife, my mother, my siblings and my friends. The entire family

swung into everyday prayerfulness: friends, colleagues and the churches we were associated with prayed ceaselessly. I feel like they prayed me through the obscene number of medical tests, surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatment which became the norm of my life for quite some time. It was during that time of real dreadful illness and prayer that I found a new and different dimension to God's presence in my life and the life of our world. I made Exodus 23:25 my own, repeating it as a prayer in the first person. It became part of my daily routine in prayer. *"So I will serve the Lord my God, and He will bless my bread and my water. And He will take sickness away from the midst of me."*

I spent more than one year either ill or recuperating, knowing that death could touch me at any time but with a profound sense that God was there, suffering with my suffering. It was this mysterious suffering God that led me into the realisation that there is hope for all of us, even in death. I realised that while we sometimes experience devastating loss when a loved one dies, it is Jesus' death on the cross, and his resurrection to new life that offers us the good news of God's unending unconditional love.

life as an ordinand

It would be another four years before I began training for ministry of word and sacraments in the URC. Training was an eye-opening learning experience for me, even as it was a teaching experience. I became aware that I was in an environment where I was having to constantly challenge someone's interpretation or description of what it meant to be 'other' – and often needed to challenge language that was not inclusive. In particular, I often needed to challenge the way the word 'black' was being used and the need to do this continues. My training years were full of new experiences of God, and learning valuable lessons about the way in which the Bible related to me and my experiences, and also how it relates to those around me and those studying with me. We were journeying together, even though we were from such diverse backgrounds. But there was always a sense that being a black man was going to present, in the real world of ministry, experiences far more challenging than those that I encountered while training in Cambridge.

ministering in SPACE – joys and challenges

Entering the real world – I felt a strong call to the team pastorate of SPACE in the Yorkshire Synod comprising six congregations in a very wide geographical spread. The name SPACE is originally an acronym for Spen and Calder Enterprise; they are a group of churches in the Spen and Calder Valleys of West Yorkshire. I came into ministry with certain ideas about mission and ministering. I certainly knew that pastoral ministry would have its challenges, but I had faced challenges before in the work that I had done and in life. So I came to SPACE wanting to be pastoral, visiting as many members as possible within the first year of ministry. I aimed to be creative in the way I presented worship, using different visual styles and music to bring aspects of marketing into the way things are done in and out of the church. I have attempted to capture the imagination of the community around me and even though most things have not proceeded as expected, they are proceeding nonetheless.

For the first year of my ministry I took public transport to get around. Needless to say, that did not make light my work, especially given that I had six congregations at that time. In fact, in all honesty, it was rather difficult getting from one place to the next in such a wide geographic spread. It was only later while visiting a member of one of my congregations and discussing my travel woes that she felt inspired to ask a question, “Don’t you see what God is doing?” I was interested to hear her answer, “If you were driving from one place to the next,” she explained “you would never really meet the Yorkshire folk, and get to know who we truly are.” And meet the Yorkshire folk I have! Actually, I have been reflecting on her words ever since.

While the SPACE profile spoke of each congregations’ context and offered real challenge, it was not until I began working within the pastorate that the context became real. There was a point made in one of the profiles that concerned me. One of the churches described their area as one that, on first appearances, would seem to be a community of ethnic minorities, but that there were also pockets of English people that the church had been targeting. When I read the profile, I got the impression that the members of this church were intolerant of ‘other’ people. From the profile, they appeared not to be genuinely interested in Christian witness to their

neighbours. I did not think that such a church would be open-minded enough to call me as their minister, or in fact, whether I would want to minister there.

surprises and building relationships

What surprised me is that that congregation was truly welcoming, pleasant and generous. They wanted me to be their minister. Yet even though they were all of these things, they were also very much inward-looking. In fact, they were a church that felt isolated with no real prospect of doing anything more than taking care of their own. The area directly around the church is mainly populated by Muslims, and newly arrived Eastern Europeans.

So I worked on building relationships with two of the Imams in the area. One, in particular, was very forthcoming and we have had a good working relationship. The other Imam was a bit more distant. He claims that Christians drink far too much and he wants me to deal with their drinking as a priority. I got the distinct feeling that, for him, Christian drinking was a bit of a stumbling block to us working together. Nevertheless, although some individuals continue to be less welcoming, the tendency for that particular church to be inward looking is being addressed. I feel a bit more confident to say that they are now beginning to become aware that they have issues to address. And I can see slow but sure progress – doors are opening to the community weekly, at Christmas, Easter and every opportunity they get.

change, priorities and identity challenges

Across the pastorate there were many members who said they would welcome change, but in reality, they fight against it. This was not a surprise, but an annoyance. Thankfully, there are a few who are willing to work to put things in place to, at least, begin to help the church thrive as it should. But each step is difficult. It means that together we have to search for and use a set of skills that I did not foresee and I would need to begin to develop a different set of tools to take us to where we ought to go as church in the community.

I came to Yorkshire not knowing that I was the very first black URC minister to be called to this county. I quickly learned that I

needed to first understand the context in which I was called to work. Each of the six churches, as it was then, had a different context and therefore different needs. I quickly became aware that what I was called to offer had to be very much tied to the people and to the community and the experience of the area. As a result, my priority shifted to getting to some understanding of the context of the area (the people and the community) and I felt that my ideas of mission and ministry needed to be first informed by the context into which I was to minister. In the meantime, I learned that ministry is a 24/7 experience if you are not intentional about taking breaks. I also came to the interesting realisation that my cultural background and my ethnicity were going to be extremely important to my ministry.

Once, while coming away from the café in our town centre church, wearing my collar, one of the patrons who was entering with his family, asked if he could please take a picture of me, he had not seen this before. “What haven’t you seen before?” I asked him, “Well it’s unusual isn’t it?” He answered. So what I am saying is that the skin I inhabit is very much part of my ministry. What I mean by this is that it becomes clearer every day that being a black man in my ministry situation is a Godsend even if it is sometimes difficult. And I believe God had a hand in leading me to these village churches where all of the churches have a 100% white membership. Having said that, I am not saying that because my five congregations are all white means that they are mono-cultural. In fact, I am in a position to see how many cultures there are across the congregations. I am also able to see how difficult it is for these same people of different cultures to embrace people who do not look like them.

One member, in a private conversation, confessed to realising that she is a racist, and while I was happy that she felt comfortable enough to talk with me about her feelings, I was acutely aware that she is not the only one. Her confession came about as a result of a request made by the Muslim women associated with the mosque opposite the church, to use our building for Friday gatherings. They wanted a space away from the men and as the church is a place of worship, they thought that it would be an ideal place for them. They wanted to rent a room each week.

I presented the women’s proposal to the church and even invited them to come and speak to the church. What ensued was

heated discussion, hurt and the threat of members walking away from the church. It got so heated that there were times when I wondered if God was truly there in our discussions, but that wonder quickly turned to the certainty that God was there because I know that God comes to us in the messiness of our lives and in the heated discussions that sometimes feel close to disaster. It is at times like these that God offers an outstretched arm and open hands, takes hold of us and guides us. God held us and ministered to us and we emerged from the experience, more spiritually mature and a more confident congregation. To my surprise the church voted to allow the women to rent a room in the church. Interestingly, it turned out that the numbers they expected to attend on the Friday evenings were too many to be accommodated in the church room (health and safety regulations). So in the end we could not rent them the room.

On another occasion, I went to visit a family who were local to one of the churches. They wanted to baptise their baby daughter, but were not church goers (though their parents were church members many years before). When I arrived, it was clear from their reaction that they did not expect to see a black man. It was so funny – their baby daughter looked at me and could not take her eyes off of me. The offering from the mother as a way of reassuring me was, “Don’t mind her vicar. It’s just that she’s never seen a black person before.”

I regularly do school assemblies. At one morning assembly, a child expressed surprise that a Christian did not have to be a white person. That tied in with a surprising occurrence at a Churches’ Together meeting. One of my colleagues was giving a report about an Inter-Faith meeting we had attended together. He was upset that more people from the churches had not attended and, as part of his report, he said, “Everybody else at the meeting was Muslim. I was the only white face there.” Now I believe what he meant to say was that he was the only Christian present. He was right that he was the only white face there so I looked at him for clarification. He then apologised to me. This particular Churches Together meeting has come a long way in how Christians and Christianity is viewed in our area. At our Annual General Meeting in 2014, I was appointed Moderator. During an Easter children’s address in which I was participating as minister to the church, the person leading

showed the children a white rabbit and said that the rabbit was being used to remind us of Jesus: big ears to hear and listen to us, just like Jesus listens to us; white and pure, just like Jesus is white and pure. It is at times like these that I can see clearly that my ethnicity forms an integral part of my ministry here in Yorkshire.

I was invited to lead an assembly at the Institute of Islamic Education, in Saville Town Dewsbury. The institute trains boys from all over the Muslim world for the roles of Imam and spiritual leader. They wanted the boys to learn more about the Christian faith so we hosted a few of the boys at the church allowing them to tour the church giving them an idea of Christian worship and beliefs. On a subsequent day, I spoke at their school assembly about my Christian journey and beliefs. I appreciate these bits of my ministry too because I believe these serve to strengthen my faith and the work I do with my church in their various communities.

In an attempt to help one of the congregations, previously mentioned, to change, I started Muffins with the Minister on a Thursday morning. The church was opened up to the community for a free coffee and home-made muffin. It has grown and I am delighted to report that it is now owned by the people who attend – church and non-churched. They have even re-named it to reflect a more community oriented spirit, even though some still refer to it as Muffins with the Minister. So the community are invited in weekly for tea, muffins (and various other goodies) a chat, a game, and / or prayer. Our non-church attendees feel right at home setting up and serving and being part of the church in community.

I know very well that just as the church needs to be present and effective in its context, as Jesus was present and effective in his context, I need to be present and effective in my context. I see a real challenge and I look forward to what lies ahead. On a weekly basis, I do worship with people in Homes for the Elderly, and I was moved to write this prayer reflection after one of my visits early on:

Remembering and Forgetting God, Yesterday as I spoke, prayed and sang with a friend that I have been speaking with, singing and praying with for over a year now, she paused from what she was doing to say to me “sorry, but I don’t know who you are.” I was surprised, taken aback. Did she really not know me? I saw the genuine puzzle in her face,

and realised that it was true: she had forgotten who I am. I reintroduced myself as if for the very first time to someone I have known for more than a year now... and I wonder God, is that your experience of us? Do you have to reintroduce yourself to us, those that you created? Do you have to reintroduce yourself because we have forgotten?

Help us God to see you and know you. Help us to see that Your Spirit is in each and every day: we have only to look and listen, and there you are, in all that surrounds us. Help us to remember you, in good times as well as the not so good times. We, who you've knitted together in our mother's womb. We, the ones who you've spent time counting every hair on our head. Help us to remember you... and for those of us that do remember, help us to do the work of reintroducing you to our brothers and sisters who have forgotten. Amen.

I describe God as remembering and forgetting because God remembers each of us by name and everything about us even willing to forget our past sins and empower us by the Spirit to move on from them. So here is our God who empathises with those of us who remember, as God remembers, and a God who empathises with those of us who forget, as God is willing to forget. I believe that God has given us a measure of time to do and be as God intended. If we are to accomplish what we feel called to, then we should use God's time and the talents we are given to fulfil those tasks. Given the work I would like to develop within the community and working with colleagues, I believe that my next step would be to focus on redeveloping my marketing and communication skills to use within the church and look at different forms of Christian worship within and outside the church. What I have learned at this stage in mid-journey is to expect new challenges from God's Word: light even in the midst of shadows; hope when the inclination should be toward despair; paths that lead to new ways of thinking and seeing.

"O give thanks to The Lord, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of The Lord say so ..." [Psalm 107:1–2]

A Long Journey – Still on the Way



Memona (Mona) Javed who hails from Pakistan is the first Pakistani Christian woman from the Presbyterian Church to complete a Master of Divinity in theology in Pakistan. She is currently a ministerial student at Westminster College (Cambridge) having completed two of her three years training. Mona is married to Shahbaz (a minister of the URC) and they are the parents of four children. In her spare time, Mona loves to sing, cook and bake!

*“Bless the Lord O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.
And do not forget all God’s benefits.”
[Psalm 103:1–2 NRSV]*

I am Memona, mother of four children and married to Shahbaz, minister of the Walthamstow United Reformed Asian Church (WURAC). At the time of writing, I am an ordinand at Westminster College in Cambridge just completing my 2nd year of training for ministry in the United Reformed Church. I am delighted to be able to share my own story or faith journey towards ministry/mission in the United Reformed Church, as well as to share my involvement in a multicultural church in my local context.

Christian family

When I look back, I am now able to grasp better the many ups and downs in my life. I was born in a Christian family. My father was an elder of the Presbyterian Church of Pakistan. I received my basic Christian formation from my parents and at Sunday school. I have two brothers and I am the only daughter. Our mother used to tell us Bible stories and sing Christian songs with us. As a family, we regularly attended church and my mother made sure that all of us were active in Sunday school. From my childhood I was taught that being born in a Christian family does not make you a Christian. You need to have a personal relationship with God and publicly accept Jesus Christ as your saviour. So in 1986 at one of our church's Annual Christian Conventions, I publicly accepted and affirmed Jesus Christ as my saviour.

school, college and questions

I attended a Roman Catholic school then, later, attended a college where the majority of the students were Muslim. This was an interesting encounter. For when my friends came to know that I was a Christian student, they asked all sorts of inquisitive questions regarding Christianity and my faith. So very early on, I had to consider questions such as: why do Christians call Jesus the son of God; why do you worship three Gods; do you know that Jesus Christ is just a prophet of God and didn't die on the cross; why do you not believe in Islam? One had to also wrestle with the constant questioning about the integrity of the Bible.

There were only a few Christian students in the college and it was really a great challenge for us to give satisfactory answers. Our

Muslims friends tried their best to persuade us to convert into Islam. However, their questions motivated me to think seriously and to inquire deeply about my own faith. As a result, I started reading my Bible, some Christian books and also attended our youth meetings regularly. Not surprisingly, I used to tire out our youth leader and pastor with the many questions. They listened carefully and, through scripture and careful explanations, they tried their best to give me satisfactory answers, so that I could be able to respond to my Muslim friends.

from college to university

After completing my studies at college, I started university where I was the only Christian student enrolled for an MA degree in Urdu Literature. Again, I found myself in a situation where I had to defend my faith as a Christian minority among Muslim students. Looking back, I can see this as a really good opportunity for me to learn much more about my faith, offering a sort of apologetic to the many questions from my fellow Muslim students.

While studying, I also started working for the Feba Christian Radio and Pakistan television. Working as a presenter for a radio programme, I used to read questions asked by Christians and Muslims to the Christian scholars and theologians. Feba Christian Radio was a great channel of learning for me. This became a wider platform for me to serve my Christian community. I also began to host and conduct Christian and church events, and became involved in youth ministry and a member of Christian Arts Council of Pakistan. The latter used to work for the encouragement of Christian youth.

For the participation in all of these activities and especially for conducting youth events, seminars and conferences, I received various awards. As I was involved in Christian youth ministry and church related activities, I started praying about it as I felt that God was calling me to full time ministry. In my heart, I felt an urge to help women and young girls who are the most depressed, oppressed and ill-treated class of Pakistani society. This passion took on a personal endeavour as I supported an innocent woman who was suffering terribly in the patriarchal system of Pakistan.

marriage, seminary and women's work

After finishing university my parents were keen for me to get married. I got engaged to Shahbaz, who was planning to go for theological training to become a pastor. I felt that God was opening a new door for me and that perhaps this was God's plan for my future ministry. Meanwhile Shahbaz had started his training at Gujranwala Theological Seminary. In April 1994, we got married which meant that I too was able to register as a student. We were the first couple in the Presbyterian Church to complete the Masters of Divinity degree. It was also a great challenge and honour being the first woman to do this. I believe that God used me to be a motivation for other girls to come forward for theological training.



During three years of training at the Seminary, my placement/field-work prepared me for ministry among Sunday schools and women. Readers would not be surprised to find out that ministry among women in Pakistan was a massive challenge. One had to deal with the deadly domination and rejection of women by men and the trauma this caused. My passion and focus was in the education women about their status, rights and key role in society, at home and in the church. To do this I arranged different meetings, bible studies, camps and seminars, in which women of all ages were invited to share their own stories. I also encouraged gatherings that were also open for men. I thought that it was very important to educate men, including the pastors, about respect, value and the important role of women in the society and in the church. I drew a lot on the role of key women from the Bible to drive home the need for a change of attitude. This was an important piece of work for me both as a woman and a Christian. There are still unfortunate situations in Pakistan and other places in the world where women are still viewed as 'labouring machines' merely to give birth to children, satisfy the desires of men, and doing all the hard-work at home. It is still an uphill struggle to fight against.

These various women gatherings I enabled provided opportunities for women to share their personal and family problems with me. It was a great privilege for me to hear their stories, pray with them and work out some practical strategies. I was also going to different churches to preach and share stories and insights on the role of women in the Bible. I had such a desire for women in ministry that I wrote my thesis on "The Biblical Foundations of Women's role and its challenges for the Church of Pakistan". It was my humble effort to encourage women and the church to see the significance of women in ministry and to change its attitude.

In 2004, my husband went to South Korea for two years to complete a Master in Theology degree. This meant I had to get a job and earn some money for my family. I started a job as a teacher in a Christian English language school. As the principal of the school knew that I was theologically trained, she appointed me as a nursery class teacher alongside teaching Christian education and arranging Bible studies for Christian students and staff. Later she also asked me to lead the regular communion services. It must be

pointed out that the majority of the clergy in Pakistan are not happy with women in ministry. You can imagine the stir this caused when some of the local pastors came to know especially since I had not been ordained as a minister. No one seemed to grasp the fact that I was not ordained because the church then did not ordain women! The discrimination was really heart-breaking for me: why could women not be ordained when they have received the same theological education, done all the pastoral placement work and graduated with a good degree?

South Korea and the United Kingdom

In 2005, my husband invited me to visit South Korea. It was a great learning experience for me to visit a new country, to see a new church, experience another culture, to meet with new people and to be introduced to a new style of praise and worship. I was really astonished to see the women's role and participation in the church of Korea. I wished that the same could also happen in Pakistan. I went back to Pakistan after two months with a great burden on my heart about the status of women in our society and especially in the church. I prayed and fasted about it.

Life, though, was to take another turn for us as a family. In 2006, we moved to the UK to serve the Lord through The United Reformed Church. My husband had two options before him: to start his ministry in Korea or the UK (as he was also short-listed for Walthamstow United Reformed Asian Church). We had much to think about and pray for. As a family, we prayed and fasted for guidance and with God's direction my husband was selected to be a minister of the WURAC. I thought that it was very funny when, at my husband's induction service, the church secretary of WURAC said about us, "buy one get one free", meaning that they had got two trained people but would only pay for one.

sharing in the life of the United Reformed Church

It was very important for me that the WURAC recognized my theological education and training. So I became actively involved in church life including leading church services, preaching and serving the church in a number of ways. These included: conducting

special services and even managing an annual choir competition; preaching, and provided guidance for people who wanted to conduct and preach; writing and directing plays and dramas on different occasions; preparing and organising quiz programmes; organising a whole night prayer meeting; arranging a special church service on Pakistan's Independence Day; collecting for Christian Aid fund with the Trinity congregation; and decorating the church on special events

I was also privileged to be able to preach and conduct church services in some of the churches of Roding Area of the Thames North Synod of the United Reformed Church. And from 2008–2012, I was a member of the URC's Youth and Children Committee and also a committee member of youth and Children committee of The Thames North Synod. It was a great honour for me to participate with my church in our multicultural celebrations, where we introduced Pakistani art, music, and culture through songs, traditional dances and fancy dress shows. In different ways, my giftings continue to thrive in the URC and I am very thankful for the URC. Through my involvement I was even able to work as a volunteer at Jimmy Child Contact Centre at St. James Church Buckhurst Hill Essex and to serve as a volunteer in the Thames North Synod Office in 2008.

another turning point – calling to ordained ministry

In 2010, I attended the URC General Assembly meeting where I met many women ministers which really inspired and motivated me. When I came back from that Assembly, I prayed asking God to open a door for me to serve as an ordained minister. I shared my vision and wish with family and friends – all of which affirmed this sense of calling. So I offered myself as a candidate for ministry. Although the process was not easy, I believed that God was with me. So step by step and through God's grace, I have plodded on experiencing moments of grace and affirmation through a daunting process for someone like myself. What joy it was to have my calling tested and affirmed and to be selected by the final assessment board. God sent many people along the way that have been very supportive, caring, inspiring and encouraging. I was blessed by them.

continuing a journey – at Westminster College

So a new turn to my journey happened in September, 2013, when I went to Westminster College. It was a totally new and interesting life-style not only for me but also for my whole family, church and friends. I am indeed grateful for a caring, encouraging and supportive family: for without this, I do not know how life at Westminster would have turned out.

At the time of writing this piece, I have finished my first of three year studies. I am enjoying the studying. College life has strengthened my faith and helped me to learn new things and get new experiences. It has also helped me to develop and improve my personality and experience a range in the URC in terms of theology and worship style. To say that I am literally being stretched and enjoying it, may be a mild way of putting the experience.

I particularly enjoyed my placement as a Chaplain in Addenbrook's Hospital learning about chaplaincy work. It has been, indeed, a very positive and supportive experience for my future ministry. I was also able to add to my skills in the areas of counselling, advising and time management. Theory and practical were both very interesting and, in which, students could share their prior experiences and give feedback for recent activities. In my theory classes, I was taught in detail about the character, role, responsibilities and duties of the chaplain. S/he is also called Priest, Prophet, healer, administrator, comforter and servant. Thus the chaplains are pastoral practitioners who seek to build a relationship of trust through compassionate presence. In this way, they offer help and support to a diversity of people. Now-a-days, the work of the chaplain is quite challenging because of our multi-faith community. As a Pakistani woman, another learning exposure that I found very helpful, was an intensive course on "Western Christianity and Islam". This has helped me to learn more about interfaith and religious harmony. It was really very useful for me to do this intensive course having been brought up in a largely Islamic country and among Muslims. This course will be very advantageous for inter-faith ministry. I am eager to learn and I am looking forward to all the opportunities being afforded.

Lest you think it has been all rosy at college, let me say that there are also challenges. There are many, which one would normally expect for someone coming back to a learning context after many years outside of an academic institution. Others are more complex: my family commitments as a mother and spouse; my Pakistani cultural upbringing and also the College's framework which is still largely geared for training white British students and not for the changing multicultural context of Britain. Notwithstanding, there is much support and encouragement around. I am still delighted that God has opened up this door for me to minister in the United Reformed Church.

I want to share with my readers, that it is a great pleasure and delight for me to be a part of the United Reformed Church. My family and I have found home and a belonging in the URC. I am thanking God for it. For me, Vision 2020 captures the sentiments beautifully:

“Our story is one of a people from rich and diverse journeys. Differences, not similarities, are the source of our vitality and strength in our common faith Jesus Christ. This includes our Church heritages, theologies, cultures, national heritages and life experiences. As a multicultural Church we are building on a biblical understanding of God's mission to which the gospel calls us to living God's word, embodying God's love and promoting God's Justice as we aim to include, affirm and welcome all.”

The URC is a multi-cultural Church. That is not wishful thinking. It is a fact and we Black and Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) are an active part of the URC. Because the URC is part of the Body of Christ – we are also part of that body. So with the words of the psalmist, let me end with this blessing: “Bless the Lord O my soul/And all that is within me/ Bless his holy name/And do not forget all God's benefits.”

On a Mission in the United Kingdom



Barnabas Dong Il Shin is a first year student at Northern College, Manchester training to be a minister of the Word and Sacrament. Since he came to UK in 1999, he has completed a BA and MA in theological studies at Trinity College, Bristol. He has been involved in the ministry of a Bristol Chinese Christian Church before joining Bedminster URC. Barnabas is married to Maria, and they have a 14 year-old son, Nathanael, with a pet, Bambi.

“On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.”
[Psalm 138:3 NRSV]

Journeying to United Reformed Church

Born in South Korea, I was given the name DONG IL SHIN. Since I committed my life as a missionary, I joined a mission organization (All Nations Worship & Praise Ministry: ANM), where my spiritual leader gave me an English biblical name, BARNABAS, which means a son of encouragement. Several years later, there was an opportunity to come to the UK, a country of our spiritual heritage. It was one of the most exciting adventures in my life to embark upon especially as I had just newly married Maria. There were two main reasons for this journey: to study the English language and theology in order to prepare as a missionary. This made us brave enough to leave our home. We were also strongly touched by the story of Abraham and Sarah so we put our trust in the Lord and set off to a strange place without knowing what the future would be.

When I look back my life in UK, I am amazed by the adventure and excitement in the journey following God's calling. I would have never imagined that I would be called to train for ministry in the United Reformed Church given the link was only my Presbyterian background in South Korea. Having focused on my missionary calling and commitment, I gave no thought in becoming an ordained minister in a particular denomination. Hence, I studied theology in Trinity College Bristol (Church of England) as an independent student whilst being involved in the Bristol Chinese Christian Church (BCCC).

After several years of training and involvement in various aspects of church, my understanding of ministry and mission has been deepened. I have also discovered that the shape of my ministry in the 'mission field' includes pastoral work, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, uplifting the body of Christ and, most importantly, to share the love of God to the world. Whilst praying with Maria to discern the future direction of our ministry, we were introduced to a local church (Bedminster URC). It was from here that our URC journey began and now we are both in ministerial training at Northern College, Manchester.

‘a journey of 1000 miles begins with the first step’

It has been more than 15 years since we came to England though, at times, I felt sometimes there has been too much time in preparation rather than involvement in practical ministry. I am now able to see my life and the time of waiting differently after studying and being touched by the story and journey of Abraham and Sarah. Since God’s call and promise, they were able to take that first step of faith to walk where God was leading through all sorts of joys and challenges. I am thankful for every step of my 15 years’ journey in the UK with my family. We have not been alone for God has been and is accompanying and leading us. And so I am looking forward to my continuing journey in mission and ministry in the United Reformed Church. The journey that Abraham and Sarah passed on to us in the promise of God, we hope to carry on in the name of Christ.

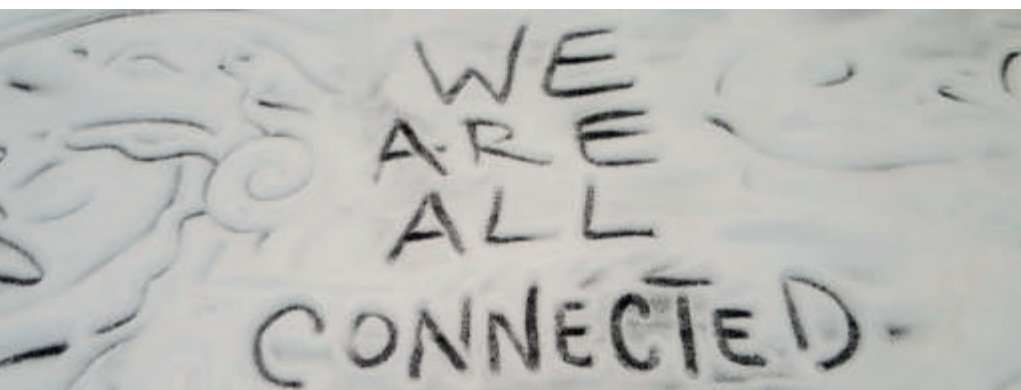
with an ethno-cultural Church – Bristol Chinese Christian Church

When I came to UK, I intentionally did not set out to be based in a Korean church or community. Instead we opted for a Chinese ethnic group which became the main focus of our missional encounters here in the UK. It was a special and exciting experience working with the Chinese church in England. Although members were from the same Chinese ethnic group, the community was comprised of a number of other nationalities: Chinese from China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and those who were born in the UK, (called British born Chinese who have western mind-set and are often accompanied by some of their English friends). This diverse mix meant that there was both a varied culture and way of thinking. It also meant that they represented a breadth of Christian traditions and, for some, this was their first time meeting as Christians and not Buddhists – the religion native to most of this group. The reason they became a gathered community was primarily because of their Chinese identity. One of the British born Chinese described it as feeling like a boiled egg: a coloured outer layer with a white inner layer, but yellow again deep inside! There is a remarkable link with the British context of a ‘western religion’ despite their complex identities and own struggles. Having

said ‘Christianity’ is a ‘western religion’, I have personally never thought about my faith as a western religious faith at all, because God is God of the universe, not God only of western countries.

reflections on western Christianity

One of things I have had to reflect on during my years as a newcomer in the UK is my perception of the Church in the UK and Europe. The missionary/evangelising activities in the developing world during colonial times are thought of as regretful by some. In our post-modern world, Christianity and churches have come under criticism and thought of as a joke. Some see it as just only as part of Britain and Europe’s history. Now, I do not deny that there were certain negative aspects of missionary history from this part of the world. But, at the same time, I would want us to recognize some of the positive aspects of which Maria and I are living examples. In countries like Korea and China at least, Christianity was introduced by the western church missionaries who had a great influence and, even today, its reputation continues to be highly positive.



Another observation, I wish to make is the importance of an ethnic identity in the Chinese Church. The Christian faith, in a very practical way, is able to bring this group together in its diversity given their different nationalities and location. Many of this group may perceive this church as having a ‘western’ religious tradition

with strange teachings, language, and stories but have found a home here in this strange and new place: discovering ways to care for each other; finding joy; having fellowship; a new lifestyle and a new way of belonging to a community. This church has had such an influence on lots of Chinese workers in Bristol especially people working in the restaurant business. In some cases, the church community has played a significant role in helping people to overcome gambling and drug addictions and to start a new life with a greater sense of belonging to a new community.

But can such an ethnic church, geared to a specific ethno-cultural group, relate to and be open to the wider community where it is located? It is important to reach out to the Chinese in the community but the church was also open to others long before (a Korean and as a pastoral worker) along with quite a number of native English people. It was very encouraging for me that this church was open to conversations in the local area: this church is very much a 'Bristol' Chinese Christian Church.

Thankfully, God dealt with the concept of a universal family-hood in Jesus Christ within my heart when I was called to be a missionary. I did not mind if I served in other countries because I believed they were all my family in Jesus. When I was in training in Korea, I had already made a number of international friends: even more now I am in the UK. Of course, I keep praying with a special compassion for my country but it does not bother me to serve people in their 'otherness.' In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's letters from prison, he reminds us about 'Jesus' being-for-others' and his unconditional love to the world especially when we live in a multi-cultural environment. Paul gave us an insight into the relationship between Jesus and the church describing it like a marriage between husband and wife in Ephesians is crucial in helping us to understand. I believe it is the will of God that the love, found in our most intimate relationship in the family, is the same love that we should have for our neighbours in their 'otherness'.

There is a saying 'You can choose your friends but you have your family.' This family-hood in Jesus among different churches, different denominations, different nationalities, and different cultures must be the key to unity in the diversity as the children of God and to proclaim the kingdom of God in this world.

Working with such a variety of Chinese people being a Korean in a Western country was not easy to do, but again, being also in such ‘a strange western belief’, I have an unexplainable link with them becoming good friends by supporting each other in prayer and care.

in a local United Reformed Church

The Bedminster URC was a new start for me. I strongly felt that I have something unique to contribute in the church in the UK. I became more and more aware of this when I served in the Chinese Church as I felt that I was not really immersed in British society despite being here in UK for some time. My new journey with the URC has opened up a way for me to step into the British society.

In Korea, I was used to worshipping in big churches. My home church had more than 2,000 members. In my work with a mission groups, we would host usually around 3,000 people in worship meeting every week. Even in the Chinese church in the UK we had more than 100 people. The Bedminster URC’s number of members was a shock for me as there were around only 15 members who were mainly elderly people with a few toddlers. While numbers are irrelevant, I could not avoid the fact that it was a new experience for me. Strangely, it made me even more excited than ever.

When I came to this church for the first time, my family were warmly welcomed from each member of the church and we soon became a family with them. On my birthday, I received birthday cards from each member of the church – every one of them – the first time in my life I ever experienced this. The minister also gladly welcomed my family and openly invited us to be involved in the church ministries.

As a small church with a lack of young people, the role of our family became important. My wife, Maria, helped by playing the piano alongside a young lady – the church musician. After the lady and her family moved on, Maria served as the church musician. My son, Nathanael, helped set up the church before the service and gradually started to play violin as well as taking charge of the computer for the power-point slides. Also, our family started a worship time for 10 minutes with gospel songs playing the guitar,

piano and violin before the service began. It was a delight to participate and contribute something in the church together as a whole family.

While my family shared in the Sunday service, I also tried to explore my ministry in relation to the local community. The first thought that came to my mind was a ministry for/with children. We had four children at that time and there were a number of children in the local area who did not attend church. So I started Sunday school with our four children. Around Christmas time, one of members brought her grandchildren to the church and I was encouraged and empowered to prepare a carol service with them. With seven kids and several parents, we could have a Christmas/Carol service with costumes! Some members noted that the last time they had any such children activity was over 10 years ago. I felt like I was flying high: I thought I was looking at the beginnings of growth in the children's ministry. I hoped this would vitalize church life. But when Christmas was over only the four usual children came to church. I learnt that the children who shared in the Christmas service were not expected to come to church afterwards. It was painful moment for me and the question is still on my mind as I contemplate children ministry in my future ministry.

I remember my own childhood and assumed there was a similarity here in the UK. In my context we went to church in order to play with friends. There were lots of interested things to do in the Sunday school and, as children, we really enjoyed it and, therefore, we encouraged our friends outside the church to come too. All this, of course has changed and is changing (even in Korea) where the younger people have, for instance, so many technological gadgets to attract them. They perceive church activities as 'boring'. My own research here in the UK suggests a big gap between church and the contemporary world. Take music, for example: I believe that church music and lyrics need to be more contemporary to speak to our young people. In addition, there is also a big gap between the adult service and what the young people receive. In the traditional church service, young people seem to be taken out to do their own stuff. I think this send the wrong signal: it is merely widening the gap between the generations.

The traditions we have inherited are important. But we also need to share the stories handed down to us in a way that both makes

sense to our contemporary world and is easily understood. How can we help our young people/young adults to express their grateful heart to the Lord in a natural, understandable and user-friendly way? I see this as an ongoing task for me.

The second area I tried to work on was a Christmas concert for the local community. This was started by a young professional pianist in our church. She contributed greatly in helping church to connect with the community. She also introduced my family to this church as we were praying for direction in our future ministry. For a small church like us, there are not many opportunities to make a connection with the local community so something like a Christmas concert was ideal. It drew on all the members of the congregation to help by inviting their family, friends, and neighbours. I prepared flyers and posters. Maria and Nathanael prepared music items with the piano and violin as well as using the young lady's professional talents. The minister, his wife and church members prepared the refreshments. On the day of the concert, the church was full with over 100 people from the community. It was a wonderful experience to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ with the church members and people from the community. For the congregation, it felt like a new lease on the life!

The third area I was passionately involved in was the parents and toddlers group (on Tuesday mornings). Our church pianist had started the toddler group with her friends to provide a place and time for their little children to play together and for parents to have a fellowship. But when her daughter started school, the group floundered. Hearing the story of the group, I was inspired and wanted to do it again. I felt it would be an important area for our church to put our effort in. To help me prepare for this, I got involved in the local children's centre to work in a toddler group as a volunteer. And I did learn much! While I carried on volunteering at the children's centre, I started Bedminster URC Toddler Group.

The idea started with just one mum and two toddlers. She advertised the group and organised fruit and drinks for the children. The first meeting started with just two mums and four children. With the skills learnt from children's centre, I knew it was important to ensure that the toys and crafts were changed every week and having different themes. These two mums and their children

enjoyed it and brought more families and children. While I was doing this, I strongly felt that it was not just the children who needed care but the parents too. Even though it was a little thing, I served tea or coffee the parents rather than them making their own. This meant I could start conversations with them. The group was even open during half term so that parents who had school children could still come.

Once I felt the families had got to know each other, I invited any free parents to join in with a group to play hand bells. These are instruments that cover two octaves. Since each bell has its own music note, each person holds one or two bells so that, as a group, we can make a song. There is no need for a musical qualification to play these bells. All is needed is that a person to know when to ring the bell and how long to wait for the next ring. It gave the parents an opportunity for both a social activity as well as some space for themselves while someone else looked after their children. Their interest led to us having a small Christmas concert and party for the toddler group. The mums played the hand bells along my family's contribution (piano – Maria and violin – Nathanael). It was great. The parents and their children listened to classical music items and sang Christmas carols in a madly noisy environment.

After one year, the toddler group grew from 10 to 17 people with 20 to 30 toddlers from multicultural families (English, European, African, and Asian families). It carried on for around three years until I moved to begin training at Northern College, Manchester. My prayer is with those families: they remain in my heart and I hope they remember a song that I wrote to use in our toddlers' singing time.

My little boy, my little girl, you were born to be loved.

My little boy, my little girl, you were born to be loved.

I love you *my son (son's name)*. I love you *my daughter (daughter's name)*.

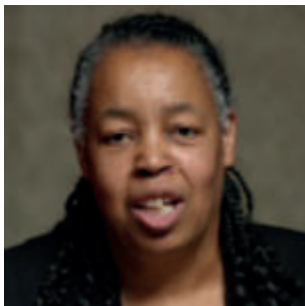
During this period, I learnt much about evangelism and community work. What I did was to focus on the toddler group and how to make it the best so that people would want to come and enjoy the social life. Through a little Christmas concert, with a song and a Christmas card, I shared the good news. I wanted to introduce Jesus as we would our best friend to other people. If I

know this is to be the most precious one that I have, why would I not share this with people whom I care about?

praying for my continuing Journey

At the time of writing I am currently training at Northern College, Manchester. Here the focus is on contextual theology whereas my previous background was focused on biblical theology. It is a wonderful opportunity to see theology with broad eyes and, at the same time, I am challenged to develop my understanding of theology and ministry. This journey began without my knowing exactly where I was going but now have confidence in which direction I am now moving in. I humbly pray that my journey of life and ministry as a Korean in United Reformed Church in the UK would be fruitful in the recognition of the revelation of God in the midst of this world in the twenty-first century. And my prayer for you is that you also know that you are fearfully and wonderfully made!

Finding Home in England



The Revd Zaidie Orr completed her formal training for ministry in 2011 and on the 1st August 2015 was ordained into Sheffield Team Ministry. Team Ministry consists of nine United Reformed Churches and four Local Ecumenical Partnerships, which is a challenging and exciting way of providing ministry across a wider area. Life is very busy and Zaidie works equally hard at keeping up with her interests, e.g., walking and photography.

"I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope."
[Psalm 130:5 NRSV]

the early days

I was born in St Mary, a parish on the northeast coast of the most beautiful island in the Caribbean, Jamaica. Looking back on my years on the island before coming to England I now see that those formative years were the grounding of whom I was to become. I did not have the easiest of childhood as I did not enjoy my Primary Schools days. I committed my life to Christ at the age of 11 and it was a bit of an understatement to say that my life changed. I did not become a saint overnight. I did stop getting into fights and started reading my Bible on a daily basis. Looking back, I am not sure that my 'physical disagreements' were meant to cause harm to the other person involved. It was much more about getting my point across and not getting the 'last lick' as they would say in Jamaica.

At around the age of 13, I asked my Aunt if I could be baptised by full immersion. Her response was that I tended to change my mind too often and that I need to give it more thought. I wondered if in essence there was probably an unwritten rule that the denomination would only baptise adults.

When I made it to High School, I was introduced to 'ragging' which is where the new students are given a hard time by the senior student to break them into higher education. My most memorable 'ragging' was when I met a senior student with the same last name as mine. I was told to go home and to come back the next day with a different last name. I did not manage to change my name overnight and I was not fearful of going back to school as I loved being at High School. When I met the senior student the following day the matter was all forgotten. My plan for my time at High school was to 'stand' for the position of Head Girl. My first step on the road was achieved in my second year I was nominated to take up the position of Student Counsellor.

At the age of 14 years, my mother had moved to England and then extended an offer for me to join her and my stepdad. I was unwilling to accept the offer but, after long discussions, I decided that I would have the option of further study in England. This was the motivation behind my decision along with being able to buy decent shoes. I do not have a shoe fetish: it was just hard to find a decent pair of shoes in Jamaica.

but in reality it was a form of racism. I would say the further challenges which I encountered as the only Black child in the class was more of an issue.

The majority of the situations were couched in humour and, thankfully, I was not fully aware of the British sense of humour so most of what was said did go over my head. The only incident that I clearly remembered was being spat at. I am sure it was related to the colours of the scarf I was wearing. My mother had brought me a scarf which she thought was red, white and blue, but in fact it was red, white and black. I decided quite early on that I would purchase my own scarfs and that I would be more careful about the colours.

After a year in school, I was fairly well accepted by the students in my class. I based this opinion on the fact that, in our General Science class and in my absence, they nominated me to represent the Liberal Democrats in the mock election which we were holding in school. The outcome of our election was the same as the general election in 1979, although I doubt whether I did the Liberal Democrats any justice as I had only been in the country for two and a half years and was not fully aware of their history and policies.

From my early childhood, it was my ambition to teach. But there is a saying about the best laid plans. In 1981, I started my nurse training. I was so pleased when the language changed as I was to become a Registered Nurse for the Mentally Subnormal (RNMS). By the time I qualified, I was a Registered Nurse for the Mentally Handicapped (RNMH). Thankfully, we have continued to update how we refer to people and the term we currently use is learning disability. The three years of training were amazing. They went very quickly but my experience at the time seemed like a lifetime. I was subjected to racism, challenges to my faith and to my ability to complete the work (low expectation). I was always questioning practice and contesting the way in which we cared for people in hospital. As I was working shifts, it was hard to have regular days off, and as I lived on site, was single with no children then I was always allocated the weekends shifts.

The high point during those years was one of our tutors who live locally offered a regular Bible study and the annual option for the children in the village the opportunity to experience an outward bound weekend at a challenge centre in Wales. The

study group kept my faith alive and offered me a point of worship. With the benefit of hindsight, I can now understand my soft spot for mid-Wales.

Being in Britain for almost ten years, there was a sense of belonging although I had experienced the usual elements of questioning my being part of British society. Just when I felt that I belonged I would be asked why would I leave a lovely warm country and come here and when was I intending to return home? I could not say that I was at home as I did not feel at home. I still had my Jamaican passport and this presented me with further challenges when I attempted to travel in Europe. I was deported from France (no visa) and when, travelling to Spain (overland), I was greeted with the words, “Will the lady with the funny passport come forward”. I was the only one who was taken from the coach and questioned at the border. In 1989, I became a British citizen through marriage and was able to get a discount on my earlier application to be naturalised. After about a year of marriage, we moved to Wiltshire and then moved to Oxfordshire before returning to Birmingham.

working life and calling

Throughout the majority of my working life, I was employed in management positions in learning disability services. The times when I have changed role or positions were mainly around the needs of aging parents or in-laws, and a sense that God was taking me down a path. I also believed that my work was my vocation and there was a sense of ‘call’ to my chosen career. These changes were also accompanied by a change in church denomination. Over the years I have been a member of the local Church of England, Baptist and Methodist churches.

In 2003, there was a clear call to change direction and I took the opportunity to explore studying at Queens Theological College in Birmingham. This was built on all the points over the last 12 years when I was being encouraged to go into the ministry. I was doubtful and on the run, as I was sure that God could have found a more suitable candidate (my Jonah years). On reflection, part of my reluctance was also the little voice from my tradition which said that ‘women should neither be seen and heard in worship’.

Although I have been such a strong and energetic advocate for people with a learning disability, I had not followed through on the feminist issues in worship. I did not see myself as a feminist or a womanist theologian questioning what it means to be a woman, how I see God, either through the eyes of a woman or the differences it would make through my eyes as a Black woman. In reality, my heart still wanted to work with people with learning disabilities, so I sought employment with the local authority. It was an exciting time as the government had introduced a number of changes which would improve services. The next six years were to represent some of the most challenging – but in a different way to life in Oxfordshire.

It was time to go and God was pushing. Eventually, I responded and gave up my employment with the local authority. As I found the experience so demanding, I wondered if the support of Chaplaincy during my time with the authority would have been helpful. Once I completed a Workplace Chaplaincy training, I began to explore the possibility of offering such a service with the local authority which covered my area. This was mainly in a developmental role as I was too close to the services and it would have been a conflict of interest. I am pleased to report that the local authority responded to the proposal and the Chaplaincy service is still in place.

God's call to a different ministry

My journey to the United Reformed Church (URC) was based on our view that the local church is where we should worship. As the nearest church to where we had bought our home was a URC, we started to attend on a regular basis. When I moved to Birmingham to care for the aging, the nearest church was a URC congregation. Within months of attending, I became a steward and, when it was time to elect the Elders, my name was suggested. It came as such a surprise to the church that I was not a member and therefore not eligible for election.

The welcome and the teaching were the key factors that drew me to the URC. At the time, the worship was varied and the congregation was multi-ethnic. My involvement in worship began not long after running the Vision4Life series. I enjoyed leading

worship as it seemed to me that God wanted us to use our imagination and senses to find meaningful ways into worship. Once I became a member, I then took on the role of an Elder. From then on, I became involved in racial justice issues as I was nominated as the Synod's Racial Justice Advocate. It was an interesting move as throughout my 30 years of my working life, I avoided taking up positions which related to my ethnicity. I would attend the Black Workers Group but would not accept nominations to any positions.

Although I had given up my employment within the local authority, I remained in contact with people with a learning disability through a local Christian charity which provided a range of services to promote independence in the community. I became a member of the Board of Trustees and, occasionally, offered training and team building exercises.

training for ministry

From leading worship, the question of going into the ministry came up again. It was a key feature during my time in Oxfordshire. I was concerned that I would not be good enough and, if I delayed the decision, I would be too old to go into full-time ministry ... but God had other plans. My training and formation for ministry was equally stimulating and yet challenging. The first two years were difficult and raised a number of questions about the whole idea 'of a calling'.

The contextual nature of the training suited my learning style. The placements fitted with the modules and made the overall learning experience a positive one.

I enjoy worship as I do believe that it is a life giving force and it is a response to God's grace. I sometimes think we make worship 'dull' because we talk about the grace of God as if it is a thing of the past and that the good news is now stale news. The tradition in our churches is that we come together for worship and we leave 'it' behind when we exit the building. We should think about placing a notice on the inside of the door saying '*Worship Starts Now*' as we are walking out the door.

It is my hope that, over time, we will become people who still dream dreams, have regular visions and still believe in miracles. One last thought, I have managed to keep a 'teaching' element in most

aspects of my life. I will have further opportunities to undertake Bible studies as this is a real source of pleasure and to be able to enthuse others to get as excited as I do about the Bible (even for a moment). This will continue to give me satisfaction.

I believe that my ministry (not unlike my years of employment) is about teaching, enabling, encouraging as we all have something to contribute to God's mission here in God's kingdom. The story continues as I look forward to ordained ministry in the URC and the challenges which that presents.

Journey of Endurance



John Danso is a Ghanaian-British. He studied theology at the University of Birmingham and attended Westminster College in Cambridge for his ministerial formation. An ordained minister of the United Reformed Church John Danso is an educator who has taught both in the UK and abroad. John has a broad experience in pastoral care, youth work, and marriage counselling especially drawing on African and European counselling methods for multicultural contexts. He has written two books which address issues of pastoral care and worship in multicultural churches in Britain. He is married to Mercy, an accredited Lay Preacher of the United Reformed Church.

*“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God,
to those who are called according to his purpose.”*

[Romans 8:28 NRSV]

this is my story

I invite you to read this story positively even though there may be negative bits in it. From my experience and reading of it, it seems there are only stories of discrimination, prejudice, racism, isolation, and rejection. Yet, I have been blessed and God has used me to open my own eyes and the eyes of many, through my pastoral care and my ministry. As Paul remind us suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character and character produces hope. I see myself as a steward of God sent to Britain to proclaim the word of God. God has given everyone a unique story to tell. And this is my story. The faithfulness of God is a story that gives us the opportunity to pass it on. I am therefore, writing because I have been God's steward and through me you may know his wonderful and numerous work.

in the beginning – Birmingham

I joined the United Reformed Church when I was studying at Birmingham University. I was brought up as Presbyterian and it was drummed into my ears by my parents to know that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. With this as my armour, the first thing I look for everywhere I go, is God's house (a church to join with others to serve and worship God). This is exactly what I did when I arrived in Birmingham. I got myself involved in the Church. I used my experience as a youth leader to organise activities for the youth. I brought new insights and ideas to the youth, by telling them Anansi stories as well as African drumming. I taught them African dancing and about African culture. I later realised how innocent the youth I met were in their knowledge about the people of Africa. I was inspired by the support of the congregation, so the Lord used me to inspire the youth who learnt a lot, as I corrected some of their stories they had learnt about the people of Africa. "Sir, is it true that you live in trees in Africa?" This was one of many naïve questions the children asked. I had some photographs of Accra the capital of Ghana. I used these pictures to help them to understand the way of life in Ghana. After my studies, I left Birmingham to London.

in London – finding a welcoming congregation

On arrival in London, my first priority was to go searching for a welcoming church where I would be comfortable in my worship and to use my talents. I settled at a URC church in Camberwell after attending few of them. I met a wonderful Welsh minister who took me on as his son, brother, friend and as a fellow Christian. Within a few months of my arrival, the Minister spotted the God given talents that I possessed. He offered me the opportunity to lead a service which led me taking the whole service later. I contributed immensely to the congregation and offer support for the existing youth club in the church. It was not long before I felt God was calling me to become a minister of word and sacrament. I discussed this with my minister who, without hesitation, led me through the processes of candidating for ministry. When the time came for me to meet the then District Pastoral Team, I was surprised that it consisted of an all-white male and female team (17 people). They interviewed me. Though it went well, I was not selected. This did not discourage my activities at the church.

a turning point

However, the minister moved to a new pastorate so I followed him to his new church in the same synod but a different district. It was his church that changed my thinking and ideas about the URC. My minister invited me to a district meeting one evening. All those who were at the meeting were white. That evening, I was the only black person attending. I was really shocked to find out that no ethnic representative was there even though the district was full of ethnic minority people in all the churches. I would say that 75% of members of ethnic minority made up the churches then. There were many ethnic minority elders but that was how far they could go. I questioned my minister about this and later wrote to the then synod moderator to find out why. In reply, there were many unqualified excuses. I further discussed the issue with the moderator again which was fruitful. It was at this stage that I decided to speak up for ethnic minority people in the church.

I did my own research and realised that, all ministers in that district were white, pastoring large groups of ethnic minority

members of their congregation. There were a lot of pastoral issues which were not addressed well. It became a problem. The then moderator invited me to give support to white ministers who dealt with ethnic minority people in terms of pastoral care. I studied for a Post Graduate course – Diploma in Pastoral Studies – at Birmingham University. This included counselling. I designed my own practice where I combined the African type of counselling with the European. I was, therefore, well equipped when the moderator invited me to give some guidelines to white ministers who struggled to handle issues concerning ethnic minority members of URC congregations.

My first encounter was with an ethnic minority couple and their white minister. The black community give a high respect to their ministers so much so that, when they are facing difficulties, the first port of call is to go to their minister. This couple were having difficulties in their marriage. They called on the minister who advised them, if possible, to separate. The couple then became offended because they were seeking reconciliation. In the African community, marriage is seen as a union vertically with God and horizontally between the two families. Divorce is not part of the equation. This is because, when a marriage ceremony takes place, all those present are each given something, for instance, it could be a ten pence or a penny: this is to testify that you have witnessed the marriage. So if a time comes for a family to seek divorce, they have to bring all those who were present at the ceremony to come and witness the divorce. But because it is so impossible to bring all those who were present at the marriage together, there would be no divorce but, instead, reconciliation is sought.

I worked with these ministers to help them offer pastoral care for the ethnic minority members of their congregations. As I was struggling to come to terms with discrimination and racism in the church, I was, at the same time, battling with the same issues at my work place. During this time of support to ministers, I was teaching Religious Studies and Mathematics in a secondary school in London. I became the first black person to be appointed by the Northern Examination Association (NEA) to mark the GCSE papers in Religious Studies. However, at the school, I was isolated. During break time I would go to the staff room and sit on the settee: no one would come and sit near me. This went on for a while so I

decided to do something about it and teach them that we are all the same. During break times, I would stand by the entrance to the common room. As soon as two people had sat down on the settee, I would go and sit between them. This went on for a while before they realised my intentions. The teachers had learnt the lesson and never behaved in that way again. I changed the behaviour of a few white people who came to terms and understood that we are all one people.

candidating for Ministry

The time came again for me to put my name forward to candidate for the ministry of word and sacrament. My minister who had seen the talent and skills I had, encouraged me. (He became my mentor and, even up until today, we are in contact.) I was invited by the Pastoral Committee of the district to attend an interview. Again, to my surprise, there were still only white men and women (19) seated in a semi-circle when I entered the room with a chair placed in front of them. This was unexpected. I was a bit nervous from the beginning but I swallowed my anger and got on with the interview. I had wanted to query the formation of the Pastoral Team but realised that it would not be helpful so I let it go. The interview went well. That year I was admitted for training at Westminster College.

Westminster College and challenging discrimination

I was to train only for two years (one year at college and one-year internship) because I already had some



training in theology at Birmingham University. I vividly remember being told by one of the assessors that I may be able to do it in one year but the others felt that this would not have been possible. I did not understand what was meant by this until later when I realised that, because I was black, they thought there was no way I could pass all the CTM modules from the University in one year. In actual fact, no one had ever done it before. But I proved them wrong. I was the only person who had ever finished the CTM modules in one year.

Discrimination, isolation and minor racism was the order of the day at the college. I was the only black student at the time but, because of my past experience both at the secondary school and in the church, I did not let this impact on me at all. One thing I said to myself was that I will bring some change and awareness to the college before I leave. In actual fact, I did bring many changes and awareness to students and staff during my one year stay at the college. I was most often confronted by some staff questioning my academic ability as to whether I could do the course. I stood up against them and made them aware that, even though I am black and not brilliant academically, I was able to match my other colleagues in my class.

Once, to prove this to one leading member of staff (who thought I was wasting my time at the college) and prove it was all to do with racism because I was black, I borrowed a white colleague's essay that has been marked with credit. I copied it word by word (even though I knew it was wrong) and presented it to my tutor to mark it. When my essay came back, I was given a pass. I showed both essays to the leading member of staff who then turned round to accuse me of plagiarism. I told him it was to prove to them that there was racism in the college and, as Christians, this was wrong.

There was a letter sent to the head office of the URC about me accusing me of shouting to staff members. In response, I informed the head office that I was not shouting but trying to express myself which was mistaken for shouting. That is my nature and, as a black person, that is how I speak. Many black people are often accused of shouting when, in actual fact, they are not. I pointed out to some staff that we are now in a multicultural society and there are some things the white community have to learn about the ethnic minority people. It was at this point at college that I decided to write for my

long essay, "Pastoral Care in Multicultural Churches". I was invited to defend this and was given a pass. I later published this into a book to help my colleagues after I had finished college. The book was appreciated by many people when it came out. It helped individuals to appreciate and understand the ethnic minority people in our churches.

Despite the fact that I experience racism at Westminster College, I would like to say that I had friends who were supportive. I had one staff member who was there for me. He was my tutor, friend and a brother. (Our families are still friends today.) His encouragement, kind words, constant checks on me, gave me the impetus and the will to carry on. Before I left Westminster College, I was very satisfied that I had been able to raise an issue which had been addressed and continue to be addressed still today at Westminster College.

leaving College and internship

The time came for me to leave college for my internship. My internship lasted one year in London. I was attached to a multicultural church with a white minister. In fact, I was pleased to go to that church. My presence at the church helped me to address some of my own concerns for my future ministry by getting involved with the church activities. I went on weekend trips with the youth and also helped with their holiday clubs where I taught the young people how to 'tie and dye'. I left the Church well equipped and satisfied ready to exercise my ministry somewhere.

The time came for students to be allocated to Churches before being ordained. However, by the time College closed in June, all my fellow students received a call to church except me. I did not want anyone to remind me why? I knew it was because I was black. (There was a black minister who had finished four years of training at Westminster College and was never called to a church.) I put my faith in the hands of the Lord. I remembered my moderator telling me that it would be very difficult to find a Church for me but he would do his best. To enable me get a church and to be ordained, I had to accept being an associate minister working alongside a white minister colleague. Three churches were then put together: two small ones and a big one. I was given responsibility for the two

small ones but working with the white minister as an associate. This did not bother me at all because, when I left Westminster College, I promised I would bring changes to the URC. I was going to be a prophetic activist shouting like John the Baptist to bring some messages home which I did with some success.

pastorate and ordination

The hard work of my then moderator paid off and for this I would like to thank her for her wisdom and understanding of ethnic minority people. I was ordained on 25th September 1995 and my colleague was also inducted for us to start work. I was put in charge of the two small Church with 12 members on the membership of one and the nine on the other. The later one closed after two years and members joined the former. After three years, the partnership with the other church came to an end. I, therefore, had my own Church. I realised that there were many people in the community who were ethnic minority and did not go to church especially from the Ghanaian community. To encourage them to attend church service, I started an afternoon service at the church. The service was conducted in their local Twi language. The afternoon service flourished so much that, by the time I left the church, there were more than 150 members. I was glad to bring these people to know God and save their souls. Out of this venture, I would say at least two of them have taken up leadership in the church. One member has been ordained and the other appointed as a leader of a church.

urban churches support and 'cause for celebration'

In May 1987, as the General Assembly of the URC passed its historic 'Declaration on Racism', the Revd. Harry Undy (Urban Churches Support Group UCSG) contacted Revd. Egland Graham and Revd. Charles Price and asked if together they would plan and execute a modest research project to discover just how the leadership within Thames North and Southern Provinces was distributed across colour, racial and just possibly class boundaries. The product of this research gave birth to an annual event called 'Cause for Celebration' in 1989.

My ministry flourished but my passion was to bring changes to the wider URC. I was appointed to join the staff of UCSG. On 18th May 1996, I was commissioned at one of the Cause for Celebration events at Christ Church URC/Methodist in Dulwich, to join the UCSG team. There I met four dedicated white people whose aim was to fight for equality and justice. I was amazed when I saw in them the desire to help the helpless, the willingness to go far enough to bring out the truth, and the desire to stand up against the tide that blows against them. It was a perfect team and I was pleased to be part of them: I brought colour into the team; I brought my ideas and vision to share with them. Their desire for equality, justice was also mine so it gave us all the opportunity to work together. The UCSG every year organises what was known as Cause for Celebration. I later became the organiser of this event. Though all members of URC for many years were encouraged to attend, the majority of attendees were often from the ethnic minority people.

multi-racial, multi-cultural officer

It was at one of such celebration we realised that ethnic minority people are not represented across the structures nor did they have a platform to advocate. There was no official platform in the URC to speak on behalf of the ethnic minority members. There was still racism in churches even in 1996, not necessarily discussed and, when raised, often denied.

Although there are many black elders in our London churches, there were hardly any black ministers and only a few black ordinands in training. Few black people attended the district councils, synods and General Assembly. All the committees in the URC and the districts were filled by white people. I brought the issue back to the table which was supported by the team. We decided to do something about it. It was through 'Cause for Celebration' events that a resolution was passed in 1996 to establish a national multi-cultural network. This was presented to General Assembly which passed the resolution and, in June 1997, a National Multi-cultural Multi-racial Officer, Marjorie Lewis-Cooper was appointed with the help of Council for World Mission. Today this post remains as Racial Justice & Intercultural Ministry in the Mission department.

Black and Asian ministers' group (EMLOMA)

Marjorie Lewis-Cooper was a dedicated woman who understood the plight of ethnic minority people. She worked tirelessly for the welfare of the ethnic minority people. She came to inspire and challenge people both black and white people all over the URC. She brought great hopes of change. It was a kairos moment when new developments could take place in building a truly multi-cultural church, where the gifts and skills of all black and white people were used and valued. This inspired me and I took the opportunity to work closely with the new officer. I became the convenor of the Black and Asian Ministers Group. As time went on, we decided to expand the meeting by inviting elders and other ethnic minority members to attend. Our meetings encouraged individuals as well as offering support to ethnic minority Christians in the URC to be active and to get involved in the whole life of the URC. One of my desires was to see more ethnic minority people taking part and not be marginalised in any way. As the convenor, I always emphasised the need to affirm the ethnic minority's identity, to express or share our own experiences, to encourage black congregation in the URC, to support each other and to share resources within the black community in terms of education, justice and politics.

I also challenged the few ethnic minority ministers to be ambassadors, informing and encouraging the black congregations. I was at the fore front and convenor of this group for many years. Many ethnic minority ministers and lay leaders were encouraged to be active and serve on committees. I myself served as a member of Synod Executive committee, the Nominations Committee, the then Equal Opportunities Committee, as a member of the UCSG, as a TLS tutor for foundation courses and also as a pastoral tutor on Rites of Passage. I had the opportunity to attend General Assemblies of the URC where I continued to advocate on behalf of ethnic minority people. I also attended district council meetings, was a member of my Area Committee, attended synods and was involved in much more. I became the Chairman of the Walthamstow Asian Christian Fellowship committee and encouraged them in their desire to become a member of URC. In 1999 at General Assembly, they were received into the United Reformed Church. This was one of my delights in my entire struggle for a place for ethnic minority people.

One of my strategies for the future generations of ethnic minority members was to provide resources for the church. My first book was on *Pastoral Care in Multicultural churches*. It provided simple guidelines to help ministers and church leaders to understand ethnic minority people and be able to offer the necessary pastoral care for them. In addition to this book and with the support of the Urban Churches Support Group, I managed to design a study pack called 'valuing one another'. This pack explores who we are and offered some scenarios for conversations (on how ethnic minority people are treated in our church). With the help of the Urban Churches Support Group, I also designed what I called 'Rites of Passage' largely for new ministers moving to London and for ministers who are in London working in multicultural churches.

One member of the Urban Churches Support Group who inspired me was Sandra Ackroyd. Sandra and I ran many events using my pack all over UK with URC, Methodist, Anglican Ministers and Lay Leaders. This had a very positive impact on people all over the URC. I realised at some point that all these efforts have not been in vain, despite all the oppositions I met because I was black. Rites of Passage inspired, nourished, and encouraged ministers to come to terms and partially understand the life and thinking of ethnic minority people.

In addition to the above events, the Urban Churches Support Group put up various events to help ministers and lay leaders in the URC and ecumenically. Some of the events I was involved in organising include: Church Secretaries Consultation, Welcome to London day; an Ecumenical-URC/Methodist/Baptist for new Ministers taking pastorates in London; Building Multicultural Church workshops (Anglican/URC); Valuing One Another for cluster of churches in London District; Transforming unjust structure; Cross Cultures a joint event with YCWT for youth and children's workers in the Urban churches in London. Participants were very appreciative of and valued my contribution.

Extracts of my book was published in Reform magazine in 2002 titled A Growing Family, for those who wanted to build on relations with ethnic Minority congregations. My second book *Join In* informed congregations how to involve ethnic minority people in

their worship. The book argued that the long standing styles of euro-centric worship need to be flexible to include and embrace multicultural worship. At the end of the book, I provided various choruses from other countries for churches to learn. The book also offered different styles of multicultural worship.

touching and believing

I have used my study packs effectively. Many people have benefitted from the courses on Rites of Passage and others. It came to a point when I realised that, it is good to learn theory, but it would be much better to see things with your eyes, to touch and feel how it is like. I, therefore, organised a trip for ministers who were in charge of multicultural churches in the URC to visit Ghana. I approached CWM who agreed to sponsor the trip. The ministers also used their CME funding to help cover the costs. So in October 2000 and October 2001, I led two groups of ministers to Ghana. The first group were seven ministers including myself with two women and the second trip were six ministers including myself and one youth worker.

The purpose of the trip was to offer the opportunity to engage with the Rites of Passage I taught. The trip was not a holiday: it was an eye opener for almost all those who went. We stayed in a house where individuals would have to get up and use a bucket to fetch their own water to have a bath. I organise several activities on Rites of Passage for them to attend. We attended various church services; naming ceremonies; thanksgiving services; memorial services; wake keeping; weddings and funeral celebrations. In Ghana, we engaged with the two Presbyterians Churches and also visited various higher education institutions.

The trip was an amazing experience for me, as well as for the others. A colleague wrote afterwards: "It has changed my perception about black people, challenged my ministry and has really opened my eyes". Back in UK we had further theological reflections and debriefings which, to my understanding, helped all. I enjoyed the trip myself and to me my aim, vision, desire that ethnic minority people will eventually be cared for has been fulfilled. Somehow I know I have achieve something for my fellow ethnic minority people.

I have always maintained that our destiny is in God's hands, but humans can manipulate it. I joined the URC to worship God and to lead my Christian life as I was brought up by my parents. But when I joined the church, I realised that it was not as rosy as I had been made to believe. I saw in the church racism, discrimination, prejudice against ethnic minority people. People will pretend you are their angel but beneath their outward gestures can lurk prejudices. There is a saying by the Anansi (a legend story teller in Ghana) that if you cannot fight your opponent then you have to shout. That is exactly what I did when I realised that ethnic minority people in the URC appeared only to be making up numbers. Largely, they were not valued and people very often failed to see what they could offer. So I started to shout. My shouting became a nuisance to many. I was seen as a noisy black minister because I would point out the truth for justice and equality.

I have served the URC for over 19 years. It has not been easy but I have touched, healed, supported and encouraged many who have found their feet and gained confidence in themselves. When I finished training as a minister of word and sacrament, it was difficult to get a pastorate because of my colour. In the URC, one is not posted to a church after training, it is the church that has to call you to become their minister. This was a very difficult concept for an ethnic minority person where racism and prejudice was the order of the day. I would have been without a church until now had it not been for the understanding and wisdom of my then moderator. After six months in my pastorate, one of the members came to me and asked to have a word. He said to me in the presence of my wife, "John, I hate black people so I did not vote for you but, since you came, I have realised that all black people are not the same." The membership of my first church was 12 and when I left the membership was 135.

My next pastorate was a URC/Methodist which I served for almost six years. And there I was stuck. From 2009 to 2014, I applied to nine churches which were vacant but, because of my colour, I failed to get the 80% required because there are people there who 'don't like black people'. Thus, at my last church where I was appointed by simple majority vote, they would not vote for me to

continue my ministry and, after nine attempts, all the officials were unable to help me. I even looked for a half time pastorate but it was not successful. I, therefore, had no choice but to retire, as there would have been no support for housing provision. In actual fact, I came face to face with my faith and God. What do I do? At the time, my wife was not very well and had become disabled. But one thing I knew for sure, that God would never abandon his own children. After many days of prayer, I accepted early retirement. But as Paul wrote in Acts 20:24: "...none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I receive from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace". For me, my race seems to have come to an end because of whom I am, yet I go with joy and blessing from all that I have been able to offer to my fellow human beings.

some closing words

I would like to conclude this story (which is not the end of my journey, but at end of an era) by using Paul's words from 2 Timothy 4:7: "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." I want to say I still have more breath in me and even though I have taken early retirement, I have not left the scene yet. I am still a member of the Thames North Synod Executive. I am still around to continue the journey to advocate for justice and equality for all people.

My nineteen years of active service as a minister of word and sacrament with the URC has brought joy to many. Through London Churches Refugee Network which I was a member, I have brought many refugee families together, I have helped asylum seekers win their cases at tribunals, and I have served each community where I have worked diligently. I cared for the people, I fed the hungry, gave water to those who were thirsty, I visited those in prison, I made room for asylum seekers and refugees and clothed the naked. I gave my all for the work I was assigned to do. This is because there was the need of ethnic minority people who found themselves at the mercy of the structures of a not always welcoming institution.

Stepping Out in Faith – Bournemouth International Church



Joshua Han ministers at the Bournemouth International Church, one of the newer congregations of the Wessex Synod of the United Reformed Church. Joshua who was ordained in the Presbyterian Church of Korea, has ministered in South Korea and specialises in church planting and church growth. He and his family lives in Bournemouth.

*“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.
Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.”*
[Psalm 127:1 NRSV]

I want to share in my own words my story of how and why I came to Britain and eventually to the United Reformed Church. Exactly twenty-one years ago in August 1994, I had a rare opportunity of a short term mission trip to China. During the mission, I had an opportunity to meet Chinese Christians and Church leaders which literally changed the direction of my ministry, mission and life. It took only a week of experiences with Chinese Christians to completely open my eyes and change my perspective of the world.

On returning to Korea from the trip, I prayed to God in the aeroplane.

“Oh God! The world is now open. The conflict between Communism and Capitalism is breaking down: anyone can go to any nation in the world today. In this fast changing world, what shall I do for you in particular in the coming 21st Century?”

I prayed, thinking of two Bible verses in Isaiah 6:8. It was then that I heard the Lord asking, “Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?” And I said, “Here I am. Send me.” Words from 1 Chronicles 4:10 became my prayer. “Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me”. I stopped praying in the way I had done, which was, “Lord! I want you to bless what I am doing”. And I started praying, “Lord! I want to do what pleases you and what you will bless.” I was seeking more of God’s will and guidance and became convinced that God is pleased with the work of world mission.

It took about two years before I began to seek God’s guidance for my life. I became convinced that God was calling me to mission. But I wanted to know specifically the geographical area where I should go and the ministry that God was calling me to. However, it seemed that God was silent in answering the questions I had.

In November 1996, after a long time of frustration, I decided to come to the UK for my Sabbatical Year. It was a time in which I could seek further guidance from God, and know where God may be leading me. I can still vividly remember the first day I arrived in Bournemouth. Immediately my eyes caught sight of a number of

international people who had come from literally all corners of the world to study. I felt my heart beating faster in excitement at this sight. I felt that this maybe was the answer to my prayer: that this was the mission field and ministry that God had for me. It felt as if God was speaking to my heart and Bournemouth, with its international population, was where God wanted me to serve in mission and ministry. I stayed in Bournemouth for four months during which time I tried to research the missional context and needs in Bournemouth

mission context of Bournemouth

Bournemouth has a large population of international students and immigrants with over 40 language schools. With one of the largest colleges in the UK (24,000 students) and a University, it makes the town a natural centre for many different international groups. Also there is 12 km of sandy beach and the town attracts over five million tourists throughout the year. With this knowledge, in 1997 I wrote a Mission Statement based on the vision I had for Bournemouth. This Statement continues to be the Vision and Mission Statement for Bournemouth International Church. It simply states:

- to reach the Nations with the Gospel.
- to equip lay people as highly effective Kingdom workers.
- to send empowered lay missionaries to the world.

a church plant

In February 1998, I returned to Britain with this vision and began to meet people sharing it by saying, “The world is at our door step. We can preach the Good News to all nations in Bournemouth, right here!” Three young Korean students caught the vision and we started a prayer meeting in my house for six months. In January 1999, we rented a local church building for a Sunday service, but we were nervous due to the uncertainty of the future.

We were not sure whether we could plant a new church with only 12 people and nobody knew whether the small congregation would have a chance of growing. In January 2000, the church changed its service to be spoken completely in English, whereas it

had been alternatively English and Korean. This resulted in an increase in attendance with numbers rising from about 50 in the January to up to 120 four months later in the April. It came as a shock to other local churches that this newly planted church was growing fast and had increased to around 200 by August 2000. It was hard to believe the rapid growth that took place with 15–20 international newcomers attending each Sunday. Some were even excited about the prospect of becoming the largest church in the UK within a few years.

the church divides

There were two painful divisions within Bournemouth International Church which followed this significant time of growth in 2000. The first one came from the landlord of the church building where the BIC were tenants. The relationship between the two parties became strained, mainly due to too many people using the building. This resulted in small damages and losses occurring over a period of time and subsequent regular complaints from the building's landlord. (At the time, it was frustrating to receive these continuous complaints.) Finally, the church's landlord decided to give BIC two choices about the future. Either BIC became a cell group (part of their own church) under the umbrella of their activities or BIC could only use the building on a Saturday and not on a Sunday. It was felt that neither option was compatible with the vision or mission of BIC and the decision was made for the church to find another premises in which to continue their ministry.

A further challenge had also to be faced. It was regarding particular doctrinal issues within the BIC with these being brought in through English Christians. The more these doctrinal issues were debated, the more the church was being drained of its strength. Instead of harmony, disunity and division was created. This eventually resulted in some group leaders leaving BIC together with members of their groups. This happened in both 2001 and again in 2004. BIC was once a church growing like flames of fire but then suddenly its enthusiasm, excitement and energy seemed to be draining away – lost. It was out of these painful experiences that the BIC found new premises in 2002 where its mission and ministry could continue.

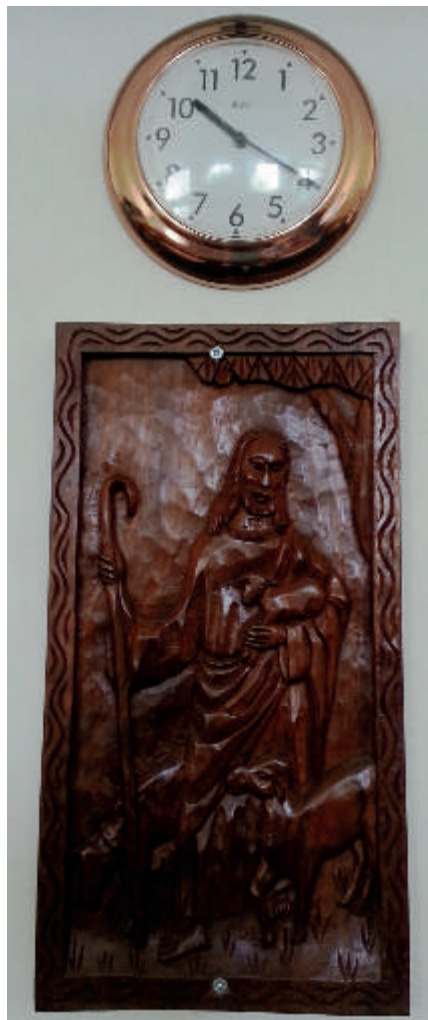
This was only a reminder that, where the Gospel is faithfully preached and God's word faithfully taught, there is often opposition. Young people were coming to know Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord and the Church was growing. However, the enemy was also active in creating division and diversion. We moved forward in the knowledge that Jesus said, "I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18)

unlocking Church Growth

So what are the factors that contribute to church growth that I have learned through our experiences at BIC? This has been a common question that I have been asked by different people. I can only answer this within the context of BIC although some of the reasons might apply elsewhere. Without any hesitation I would answer as follows:

Timing and Discerning God's Timing

Multicultural societies have not just arrived in the past few years but had been active in 1990s and were already having an impact worldwide. The problem was that, in the UK, most people were unaware that they were living in a multicultural society and were oblivious to its influence. This was also evident in the Church



where services and activities continued in the pattern that had been established over many years and had become inflexible in catering for the different cultural backgrounds, language groups and worship styles that were now integrating into society.

To know the right time is very important. Jesus said, “You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don’t know how to interpret this present time?” (Luke 12:56) So what does such a text and others verses tell us? There was then and has even been, a need for the people of God to be aware of what is happening around them, to know the signs of the times and what God is doing, so that they may respond under God guidance and direction to reach the world around them. In the late 1990s, the time was right for the development of multicultural ministries within our communities requiring churches to respond to the changes in society by the establishment of multicultural activities. The local churches can no longer call themselves “Community Churches” if they are not prepared to respond to the needs of a growing diverse and multicultural local community.

Within the Bournemouth community, there was no church that was actively involved in international ministry. Whether this was out of necessity or lack of interest, I do not know, but unfortunately this was the situation. The wave of multiculturalism had washed across our communities during the 21st Century and, by knowing and reading the signs of the times and through God’s leading and direction, BIC has responded and experienced growth. The moment was right.

a clear vision and being envisioned by God

Throughout history change has taken place through individuals who have a strong commitment and vision for what is possible. The Old Testament gives accounts of men and women who have had a vision given by God to fulfil God’s purposes. They have enabled others and great things have happened in God’s name. Even today, there is a need for the Church to have a vision of the purposes of God and to see that fulfilled through our lives and ministry. It is crucial that the leader and leadership have a collective vision for their

church's ministry and mission. BIC has a very clear vision of its ministry in Bournemouth. This is passed down to ministry leaders and to everyone in the BIC. It is explained, taught and shared within the church so that no one is in doubt as to what the ministry of the BIC is. Visitors are regularly welcomed to BIC and members are encouraged to talk to them and are prepared to answer questions and explain our mission.

This God given mission has not changed since the beginning of BIC and has been summarized simply as: "Reach the Nations, Equip the Laity, Send them into the World." In addition, we are committed to the view and practice it, "All members are leaders, and all leaders are learners and missionaries". This is said to encourage everyone to learn and grow through small groups but also everyone is a servant to each other. To have a clear God given vision which is understood and taken to heart by the whole church gives unity, focus purpose and direction to the church.

learning together: equipping and empowering disciples

a. vision and a mission trip

Looking back over 20 years there have been two significant mission trips that I have experienced. The first one was a trip to China which illuminated my thinking and opened my eyes to the world. The second one was a trip to the UK which revealed the fact that the UK was the mission centre for the world in the 21st Century. These experiences I brought into BIC's ministry and applied to the church's mission. Gaining a vision for mission is important but such a vision needs to have an application and so short term mission trips became an integrated part of the life of BIC. This has equipped individual lay members of the church for future mission and service. For the first ten years, we organized and participated in these mission trips twice per year and became known as "The Vision and Mission Trip". Their value and resulting spiritual fruit was immeasurable. Each participant became a key-worker in the

ministry of BIC and they developed a deep commitment to serving God and have become life-long partners of the church. These mission trips have had a significant impact in developing spiritual maturity in individuals, far more than any other church ministry. The trips have developed vision which increased personal commitment and spiritual up-building.

b. small group bible study

BIC has two different types of Bible study, one is for a particular national group and the other consists of mixed international members. Currently there are nine different weekly Bible studies, some held in different languages. The senior minister's major role is to equip and back up the small group leaders who themselves teach the Bible to their members. Each group is responsible for organizing regular food and fellowship for their group every two months which is held in the homes of members. The evangelism strategy is to invite friends to these home groups and house meetings prior to inviting them to a BIC service.

c. evangelism activity

In order to have church growth, there is a need for outreach and evangelism. This is the responsibility of all the church not only individually but also collectively. BIC organise Special Invitation Services three times each year and the church, as a whole, is encouraged to invite family and friends to attend. In general, these services have a higher attendance than the regular Sunday service with a diverse number of nationalities attending. A special programme is organised and presented with a multicultural emphasis. This not only enables the Gospel to be preached in a relevant way but focusses the church on BIC's mission and ministry. On a smaller scale, there are regular "Dinner Invitation" outreach activities which are held during the week focussing on particular language groups and nationalities. These are organised by individual BIC members who are reaching their own language group. Church members are encouraged to organise and take responsibility for the outreach and evangelism activities so that each member shares and participates in the mission and ministry of the church.

d. sunday services

The church needs to reach out to the communities within which they serve and minister. They should present the message of Christ in an understandable, relevant and attractive way. BIC's growth has taken these fundamental considerations into the way that their Sunday activities are organised. By encouraging everyone to participate in a Sunday meal creates an atmosphere of openness, trust and fellowship so that conversations can take place together with opportunities to share the Christian faith.

Worship is expressed in a contemporary way which includes a diverse range of songs and music styles. The service continues within a relaxed atmosphere where visitors are made welcome, not to BIC as a church, but as a family of God's people no matter what an individual's language or nationality is. The message is presented in a challenging yet relevant way with the dependence upon the Holy Spirit to give guidance and direction and to touch people's lives. With a time of fellowship at the close of the service, there is an opportunity to meet and encourage visitors and respond to their questions and needs. Newcomers are encouraged to meet with members of their own nationality and to join a mid-week activity returning the following Sunday.

our journey continues

BIC continues with the vision and mission that established the church all those years ago. Many international young people have heard the Gospel of Christ and experienced the love of God in their lives, receiving Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Every Sunday, there are newcomers to the church who are welcomed and Christ's love is shown to them. There are regular services of baptism, where believers in Christ show that He is Lord and they are following Him. The regular Sunday services have consistent numbers attending perhaps not in the large numbers that many would expect. But the vision and mission of BIC is not to establish a large community church but to reach the nations for Christ. Many attenders are in Bournemouth only for a short time whilst studying at one of the language schools or the university. They are international students who do not intend staying in the UK: some are here for only a few

weeks or months; others for a few years before returning to their home countries. BIC reaches out to them with the Gospel, baptizes them, gives them discipleship training before they return home so that they might be effective witnesses in the countries to which they return. They then become Kingdom workers being empowered by the Spirit to carry that same message that they have received themselves into the world. Over the years, if everyone who had heard and received the Gospel through the ministry of BIC had stayed in the church, BIC would have certainly become one of the largest churches in the country. But that is not the ministry that God has given to BIC. It is to reach the world through the ‘internationals’ who come to Bournemouth that they may become ambassadors for Christ.

When writing to the church in Corinth Paul says, “What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.” (2 Cor. 3:5–6). This is the Biblical principle that the BIC emphasizes. The Gospel is preached and the Word is taught and so the seed is planted. The leaders of the various Bible study groups continue to teach, discuss and encourage and so the seed is watered. But we are dependent upon God, for it is He who gives the growth. Paul continues by using the analogy of a builder, vs 10–12, and much of the ministry of the BIC is laying spiritual foundations. Others may continue to build upon these foundations as the ‘internationals’ return to their home churches. But once again the emphasis is on the work of God and the basis of all our teaching is Jesus Christ. Solomon in a song of ascents says, “Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labour in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.” (Psalm 127:1). The church is Christ’s body and so the BIC is His. Upon Him we stand and the truths of His Word, moving forward in His name as we reach-out to the ‘internationals’ in our community. Our vision, mission and ministry come from Him and, as co-workers with Him, we meet the challenges of a multicultural society in the 21st Century.

Ministering in a Different Context



The Rev Samuel Musonda Silungwe currently ministers at Rockingham Forest Group of United Reformed Churches in the East Midlands Synod. He formerly served in the United Church of Zambia (UCZ) in various ministry contexts and roles.

“The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.”
[Psalm 9:9 NRSV]

introduction

This is a reflective piece about my experiences as a minister from another country (Zambia) now working and settling down in a different cultural and social context (the UK). To help my readers' journey with me, I have decided to organise this piece in six sections. In the first section, I briefly explain what I call, 'our starting point in ministry'. Every journey has a starting point, and so is the Christian Ministry. Unless otherwise stated, these are the two contexts that will form the framework of what I will share.

It will be unrealistic to document how I got to the UK and the United Reformed Church (URC) in particular, without saying something about my home context, especially my previous church, the United Church of Zambia (UCZ). What valuable experiences and gifts I did gain from the UCZ that have been applicable to and/or useful in my new context? Therefore, in the second section I will try to give a brief overview the UCZ, its genesis and how it is structured. In the third section I will discuss my experiences of working as a minister in the UCZ. As people, we may be similar in our essential humanity, such as communicating with each other and the way we sustain ourselves, but yet our speaking different languages and our aspirations are also different. Therefore, section four will be devoted to the question of my work and settling down as a minister in a different cultural and social context; in this case the British context. In section five, I will briefly talk about the changing context for ministry. This will be necessary because any attempt to engage in effective Christian ministry will require us to discern both the regional and global factors that may influence people's understanding of the gospel and themselves.

Although I have not been with the URC that long, I have learned a few things that I feel I can share with other people who may one day find themselves having an opportunity to serve the church of God in a context different from their own. So, in section six, I will share a few tips for a smooth transition into a new cultural and social context drawing on my experiences. What I write here is necessarily provisional and selective because I am still on a journey. I have just entered into my third year of ministry. But I hope that the ideas I am going to discuss will at least interest all those whom

God has called and gathered to preach the good news and take care of the community in which they are based.

ministry's starting point

So let me share something about my understanding of Christian ministry. In ministry, everyone's journey starts with a "call" and that call is from God, but we are called differently. There is a saying in my tribe that goes like this: "Go and be born but not to be alike." God calls us as we are – individuals. No call is more authentic than another.

Everyone's journey is different. In my case, my parents introduced me to Sunday School at an early age. I went on to become a Sunday School Teacher. As a teenager and youth, I was a member of a Youth Church Choir, Youth Christian Fellowship, Boys Brigade and Men's Christian Fellowship. During my secondary school education, I was a member of Scripture Union. If you were to ask me, did my early introduction to church and involvement in various church groups helped me in any way to be aware of God's call, my answer would be, no! It is not when, where and how we experience God's call that matters but rather to understand God's purpose for the church to which we are being called to serve.

Very early on, I was able to see ministry as serving God and as serving to other people in the name of Jesus Christ. I also learnt that the Christian ministry I have been privileged to be part of is God's and not mine. For, it is God who calls and sends us as instruments of God's offering of full life for all in the world.

ministry in the United Church of Zambia

The UCZ owes its genesis to the London Missionary Society (LMS), the Church of Scotland, the Methodist Missionary Society (MMS) and the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (PEMS). The UCZ's uniting story began in 1945 (LMS and Church of Scotland forming the Church of Central Africa in Rhodesia [CCAR]). The second phase of the uniting journey was in 1958 when the Union Church of the Copperbelt (*an interdenominational church started by Africans from different areas in Zambia*) and the Copperbelt Free Churches (*mainly European Congregations*) joined with the CCAR to form the United Church of Central Africa in Rhodesia (UCCAR). A third phase in

1965 saw the PEMS (known as the Church of Barotseland) and the MMS joined the UCCAR to constitute the United Church of Zambia (UCZ) on 16 January 1965. Given these unions meant that the UCZ has strong partner links with the Church of Scotland, the Methodist Church in Great Britain, the United Church of Canada, the Presbyterian Church of the USA, the United Church of Christ (USA), with CEVAA (*Communauté d'Eglises en / Community of Churches in Mission*), the Council for World Mission (CWM), the World Council of Reformed Churches (WCRC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC). The UCZ is the largest Protestant Church in Zambia and it continues to grow rapidly. According to the 2009 church statistics, the UCZ has a membership of about two million Christians. Out of this membership, 60 percent are women and the rest are men and youth. The church has ten Presbyteries and with about 1060 congregations dotted all over the country.

training and studies

I trained for the ministry from 1984 to 1987 at the UCZ Theology College and Makerere University. After completing my theological studies, I worked for two years as a probationer minister, and was ordained on 25 March 1990. I have worked in three Presbyteries: the North Eastern Presbytery, the North Western and the Copper-belt Presbytery. Many of the ministries included pastoral oversight to five different congregations, in both rural and urban contexts. In 1990, through the Council for World Mission (CWM), I was invited to do a “Special Ministry” with the URC after which I returned to Zambia in 1992 and continued there in ministry.

From 1997–2001, I was privileged to go for further theological studies at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. While there, I worshiped with the Methodist Church because of its proximity to the campus. But I had also connections with the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa and the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa through my lecturers and fellow students in the Department of Religious Studies. Most of my fellow students were ordained ministers, and two of them who came from within the Western Cape region extended their invitation asking me to take some preaching appointments in their local churches, which I gladly accepted. What I realised while interacting with fellow

Christians in Cape Town was that there was only one ministry and Jesus Christ is its focal point. Being a fellow African, it was not hard for me associate with these communities. This was helped by the fact that, as a region, our people share some cultural similarities.

ministry in Zambia – a taster

Let me share with you something of what ministry is involved for a minister. The UCZ recognises two types of ministries: the Ordained and Lay Ministries which will take various forms. This means a lot of involvement of the laity in the various ministries of the church. As a minister with the assistance of two Church Secretaries and church Treasurer, I was responsible for all the areas of the life and work of the church. The Church Elders, the Stewards and all the various Committee Conveners were accountable to the minister. As a minister, I was a link between the lay leadership and the general membership. It was also my duty as a minister, in consultation with the lay leadership, to plan and coordinate the church's annual programmes. The duties expected of me as a minister included conducting worship, preaching the gospel through the word and sacramental action, providing pastoral care and doing Christian education. But there was also the larger calling of the wider church which saw me serving as a Presbytery Youth Convener, Presbytery Secretary, Presbytery Christian Training Convener, and Synod Lay Preachers Convener. In all the five Consistories I served, I held the position of a chairperson.

In the UCZ, the leadership style is more Episcopalian than Congregational. The minister was respected and obeyed, assuming a sort of chief-figure role. A minister was given authority, reflecting African cultural practices. Elders and spiritual leaders are honoured and respected and church members will expect clergy to provide guidance and leadership. However, it is not wholly a 'blind' 'follow the leader system' as found in some African evangelical/pentecostal churches. For in the UCZ, the minister is accountable to the Congregational Council as a sort of provision for checks and balances.

The life and work of a congregation of the UCZ revolves around church committees, called a Section. Although a Section is not recognised a court, it plays an integral part in the mission of the local church. There a minimum of twenty-five houses in each

Section. A Section could have between fifty and two hundred communicant members. Two or more Elders, with the help of Stewards, manage the affairs of the Section such as, meetings, pastoral visitations, weekly Bible studies, funerals and any other activity pertaining to the life and work of the church. To be able to attend Section programmes, I grouped the Sections into Zones, which met once in a month, specifically for Bibles studies. For pastoral visitations, however, I had to visit each household in a Section. As a minister, I had to have the knowledge and understanding of the functions of each part of our complex structure. But the way all the committees functioned actually relieved the ministers of much of the pressure from work, while serving in a supervisory and enabling role. The demands of ministry in Zambia is quite enormous.

As a united church, the UCZ is committed to ecumenism and my ministry reflected this commitment to ecumenism. My stance on local ecumenism has always been very strong. I was inspired with what I learned from Churches Together in England, and I used some of the ideas to bring the local churches together in the districts I worked in. Sadly, my initiatives were viewed with suspicion because none of the ecumenical projects that I encouraged continued after I had been transferred. The problem was not with the ordinary church members but by the clergy who perhaps did not understand the purpose of ecumenical projects.

from Zambia to Britain

As earlier noted, I was invited through CWM to come and work with the URC from August 1990 to August 1992. I spent three quarters of my time working with the Fellowship of United Reformed Youth (FURY). My first placement was in Plymouth at Plymstock URC. The second was in Bradford at Lidget Green Methodist/URC. I did the third placement at Witham URC. The programmed was designed in such a way that I was able to work both with the minister and the youth leaders in all my placements. In all the three placements, my hosts were the local members of the church. I had a month's break in between the placements with London as my base. My host there was a minister.

As someone from another country doing a “Special Category Ministry”, as it was referred to, was indeed a big challenge and, at the same time, a wonderful experience. Not surprisingly, the first challenge was a cultural one. Coming from a totally different cultural background was never going to be easy to fit into a British way of life. Secondly, it took me a while to understand the operational practices and ethos of the URC and the philosophy of Youth Ministry. Of course, four-month slots for each placement were not long enough to help me settle down and get involved at a deeper level. The positive thing about the whole programme was that I was able to learn how the URC (locally, across synods and as a denomination) were trying to enable youth ministry. Also, the Bradford placement challenged me to think about how to live my faith in a multicultural and multi religious society. With the help of two URC ministers and support from CWM, I spent my second break involved in an interfaith dialogue programme. For my fourth and last placement at different local churches, I asked the URC permission to continue at my third placement, especially to be allowed to work independently as an interim minister at a local church. Gladly my request was granted and I spent the remaining eight months serving as a minister at Tiptree and Great Totham URCs.

When I received a call to come and work with the Rockingham Forest Group United Reformed Churches in 2012, I had a number of questions which did not occur to me the first time (1990) I came to the United Kingdom. This time the big question for me was: how will I live and work among the people who may not understand my cultural context? Being told about someone’s culture and living and working with someone from a different culture is not one and the same. As a part time lecturer at the UCZ Theological College (2005–2012), I was privileged for four consecutive years (2008–2011) to host some members on the CWM “Face to Face Programme”, from the Asian and European regions. Though these people only stayed with us for four weeks, it became clear to me that, even if people would have cultural differences, they can participate in the same culture in different and just as valid ways.

With ministry we often map out strategies, ideas, plans of how we are going to work or disciple would-be prospective members. This strategy has proved insufficient for me in this new context. I had to start from scratch because even my earlier ministry with the

URC has not helped me. In fact twenty-three years is a long time and Britain has seen a great shift in demographics, family composition, social attitudes and technology. These and other contemporary issues such as globalisation and secularism have tremendously changed the religious and social landscape in Britain. With this in mind, it became very clear that before I could engage in ministry, I had to spend some time thinking about context. It was not going to be possible for me to communicate the gospel in a relevant manner without evaluating the context in which I serve, both inside and outside the church.

As I started my work in the group of churches I was aware that my greatest and most important duty is to preach the gospel. And it has always been my understanding that ministry should be concerned about the whole of life. The spiritual is not an isolated dimension. Hence, this is a huge task that demands care, wisdom and the involvement of the whole company of the church. All are called to work together as partners in God's mission. Yes, there are some specific ministries: but these are to enable all the members to fulfil their vocations as servants of God and witnesses for Christ not only in our church, but also in our communities.

The URC places much emphasis on the ministry of the whole people of God. The reality though, in my limited experience, is that the level of participation of members in ministry varies greatly. A few may be active and there are those who are willing to spare some time to help at coffee mornings, flower festivals, or a one off church programme. Many, though, are reluctant to offer themselves as church elders or junior church leaders. This has been one of greatest challenges I have been faced with as a minister. How can I enable and encourage members to consider discerning the call to offer their gifts in our life together? What can I contribute to a sense





of believing that God in Christ has something remarkable for all in the community and has blessed all with gifts?

context matters: and it is fluid

Here the changing and fluid nature of society has become more evident to me. The pace of the change is very fast. Rapid global changes are bringing complex shifts, which in my view, challenge us ministers to make constant evaluation of our call and vocation. This is why for me understanding my context must be given high priority in the practice of ministry in Britain. The church used to be a place to go on Sundays. But today in the UK, families use them for sports, visiting families (spread all over the land), and other social events. Keeping in mind these and other changes will help us to be with the people where they are and how they are to give shape to ministry that is relevant. Understanding this is important for transition from an African context such as mine into the British context.

transitioning – some considerations

Change is always challenging and ministry change is no exception. I am aware that being an African defines who I am. I am African but also a Christian. But what does it mean to be a minister in a different cultural and social context? So far my experience working as a minister both in Zambia and here in the UK has taught me that ministry is not done in a vacuum but takes place within a context of time and space. It is good to know “where you are coming from” and “where you are now.”

When I speak of culture I am not necessarily implying things of the past. I also have in mind the way the culture in Britain or Zambia is responding to the new emerging cultures. Today people hold different views about marriage and family. Jobs people do, their leisure, politics and education represent different social structures, and these will influence the ways in which we engage with and live out our faith. It may be the case that we live in a global village and that our cultures can be shared. At the same time, people and situations are different. So it is important to take a look at the culture you are now part, what it looks like and then ask yourself if there are

some elements in it that you can identify with. By taking a close look at your new cultural context, you will be able to see the possible shape or shapes of the local church to which God is calling you.

While teaching contextual theology in Zambia, I recall saying to my students that as a minister in a new cultural context, they should be theologically and pastoral sensitive. I raised this point from my experience in my first pastorate in Zambia where the Elders were not keen to hear me preach in English or Bemba (a local language dominate in the province but not the language of the local people which is Namwanga). To make matters worse, the latter is my language but I never spoke it fluently. I had to quickly catch up with the language in six months. This quickly resulted in a better relationship with the leadership of the church and the general membership. So it is important to be with the people where they are, that is, connecting with them, their culture, values and lifestyle and as well as their location. “One size fits all” will not do. I suppose it is important to recognise that there are many ways in which ‘church’ can be embodied. The challenge is how to work with that variety so that every member in the church can grow together in faith.

some ending thoughts

We might have had a long and successful ministry in our own country, but every context is different. As a minister from a different context, we should understand that we do not go into our new context to reinvent the church. The church has always been there and God has been at the heart of its mission. Probably it will be wiser for us to see our mission and ministry in terms of where we are living now and the community we are part of. Of course, we cannot just throw away what is part of us culturally. Those who minister and those who are ministered to are all the product of *Missio Dei*, God’s mission. So, all God’s people are called to participate with God and be partners in God’s mission.

Listening to what people have been saying has helped me to pay attention to the context I now find myself in as a minister. Certainly it is vital to understand the people whom we hope reach out to with the good news. Effective mission emerges in having dialogue with the people, their geography and location. It would be totally unfair to think that we have the right to set our own agenda for ministry.

Jesus in Mark 10 provides us with a perfect example of what it means to dialogue with 'the other'. Faith does not come from the air but rather from within a given cultural context. I think that people should come to know and follow Christ in the context of their own culture. The challenge I have noticed so far is how to encourage the church members to exercise their ministries within and beyond the church.

My Journey to ‘Here’



Karen Campbell is Church Related Community Worker of the United Reformed Church and is currently based in Luton.

*Nathaniel said to him: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”
Philip said to him, “Come and see.”
[John 1:46 NRSV]*

A Table for All

Come as you are, because you are welcome.
Come take your place, and hear now the call;
The table is spread, and the music is playing –
Come take your place at the Table for All.

Don't ponder now who you think is worthy –
When, where or how RSVP they sent;
Instead come with gladness, and joy overflowing,
For each person present was God's first intent.

No special place for royal or mighty,
Earthly wealth and position a thing of the past
At the Table prepared with upside-down values,
Where the last shall be first, and the first shall be last.

No longer division 'tween haves and the have nots;
Here no oppressed, neither those who oppress.
Where the world has said 'no' to dignity of justice,
Our God, at His Table, says 'yes'.

And don't be fooled into thinking God does not see colour –
His Table for All is no sea of grey;
He creates and admires, and declares 'It is good',
No matter what racist or bigot may say.

He calls to His people from every direction,
From the east to the west, the north and the south;
There's drink for the thirsty of every nation,
A banquet abundant for every mouth.

A rainbow of women and men at His Table;
Different languages, customs, and faiths from all lands,
Invited to sit, talk and learn all together,
More human made by the joining of hearts and of hands.

So come sit with prince, and come sit with pauper,
With old and with young freely come take your rest;
Whatever the label, the burden you carry,
Lay it down, for now you are most honoured guest.

And let us not wait to dine at that Table,
For though it's not yet, the Table is now-
Where valleys are filled, and mountains are levelled
And a sharing of fate emerges somehow.

Oh the Table is spread, and the music is playing,
Let's listen and hear and respond to God's call,
And live into being the Kingdom we cry for –
The Table with room for All.

where do I come from?

I was in primary school when *Roots*¹ was shown on British television. Overnight, it felt like my secure world had been turned upside-down. To my naive mind it seemed that people who had been fine yesterday were angry and hostile today – ‘because of what your people did to my people’. I didn’t understand why a television programme had made such a terrible impact; I simply wished it had never been shown!

I grew up in Tottenham, North London. The middle-child of seven, I was born to Jamaican parents, and Tottenham was the only home I had ever known. Tottenham was always a multicultural place, and whilst racism was alive and well and fairly overt, I was sheltered from its worst effects. I knew there were Black people, White people and Asian people; Caribbean people and African people; Jamaicans and ‘Smallies’². I knew that all these people were different, and some were apparently ‘more acceptable’ than others based on the colour or shade of their skin or where they hailed from, yet this knowledge didn’t really impact my world. I was secure in my family and comfortable in my community. I had friends of different cultures and different faiths, but basically, we were just children together. Racism belonged to the world of the adults... and they could keep it!

When *Roots* was screened, this was the first time I had heard about slavery; the first time I realised that people could treat each other in such inhumane ways; the first time I was conscious of real tensions and anger simmering below the surface. I still didn’t understand why something I’d thought was ‘just a programme’ could create such anger, but I think this was the first time I consciously acknowledged that I am Black, and that being Black could have direct implications for my life.

Over time I became more aware of colour and its implications. I came to realise that there were some in British society who wanted Black people to ‘go home’, but England was where I had been born and raised – I was already ‘home’, wasn’t I? But I recall visiting my sister in Basildon as a teenager, and being approached by an older

¹ *Roots* was the dramatization of a 1976 novel by Alex Haley centred on Kunta Kinte, an African youth captured and sold into slavery in Colonial America.

² A term frequently used by Jamaicans to describe people from the ‘small islands’.

White woman enquiring ‘Where do you come from?’ When I explained that I come from Tottenham, the reply came, ‘No... where do you *come* from? Jamaica...?’ Growing up, it seemed that Britain did not expect much of Black youngsters, and too often it seemed that Black youngsters lived down to the low expectations – but I also realised that the playing field was not even, and I came to accept that Black people needed to be twice as good in order to be equal.

In my teens I was a good church-girl, quiet, well-spoken and a bit of a swot – regularly coming top in school exams. I encountered a few individuals who ‘didn’t like Black people’, who somehow conceded ‘but you’re ok’. I apparently did not match the stereotypes they held in their minds. I grew up in the midst of all this confusion.

questions and more questions!

I was brought up in a Black-majority church. I was taught to believe that the Bible is literally the word of God, that there is right and wrong, good and evil, with little grey space in between. I learned that sinners would be punished with eternal damnation, probably involving the fires of hell, whilst those who lived righteous lives would live forever, and ever, and ever. (As I grew older, I started to feel that neither prospect sounded particularly appealing!) I learned not just to fear God, but to be afraid of God, who was always watching, seeing exactly what I was doing. I learned that all sin was same sin... except sexual sin always seemed worse, and homosexuality was an abomination unto the Lord. I learned that religions other than Christianity involved worshipping false gods, and their adherents were in need of salvation. Let me be clear – I am not sure all of this was explicitly preached from the pulpit, but these were the messages I picked up in my early faith journey. And so began my struggles.

As I grew older my mind started to question, and I realised I did not believe everything I was being taught. I wanted to believe. I pleaded with God to help me believe. I tried to cling to a faith which I now realise was not my own, and I grew up with issues: What did I believe about the nature of the Bible? What did I really think about sex and sexuality? Did I really believe that Christianity was the only

path to God? And how could I make sense of a God ‘who *is* love’, yet would see people burn for an eternity without having the compassion to put out the flames? As I struggled with these things – and simply being a teenager – I drifted in and out of church. When I did attend, I always had a sense of coming home; even so, the periods of absence grew longer. Eventually, in my early twenties, I fell pregnant, and I knew the church of my childhood would no longer be home. I felt the church would require me to give an account of myself, but I did not feel like a terrible sinner and was disinclined to answer to anyone except God... and my parents! And so I left.



When my daughter was approximately three years old I found my way to High Cross United Reformed Church. I did not specifically choose the URC, it just happened to be the closest church to my home. This was the church where I had previously had my daughter blessed, and I was seeking to give her a grounding in the Christian faith. High Cross was a revelation. Sitting in the congregation listening to Francis Ackroyd preach, I felt for the first time I was being encouraged to question, to figure out, to develop a faith of my own rather than accepting wholesale what others believed. I remember Francis saying ‘God does not require us to believe 100 impossible things before breakfast!’ I felt I had permission to employ my brain – and it was extremely liberating! I don’t think I have stopped questioning since then.

High Cross has a mixed, but predominantly Black, congregation. Over time I discovered a range of theologies coexisting in the one church. Again, this was a revelation; we did not have to be uniform in order to be one. This made sense to me; it seemed right. The more I pondered the concept of ‘the Kingdom of God’, the more I believed it must include all kinds of diversity, just as God has created humanity in all our diversity.

After sometime I was invited to become a member of High Cross. This took me by surprise. I had thought that regular attendance could be equated with membership, but now I was being encouraged to make a commitment, to stand up and be counted. I was not sure I was ready. Worse than being a sinner was being a back-sliding Christian – more of my baggage? I did not want to start a journey I wasn’t confident of completing. But I agreed to attend membership classes at the manse. I listened and spoke and thought and prayed – but I still was not sure. How could I know for definite? Lord, please give me a sign! Then, one evening, I was heading to class, pondering this dilemma. As I walked towards the manse the thought occurred to me ‘What if I am the only person there? There will be nowhere to hide!’ Well, I have long since believed that God has a sense of humour! When I arrived, I discovered I was indeed the only person able to attend that night... & I soon found myself on the hot spot: ‘Have you decided what you want to do?’ I hadn’t decided, but I heard myself say ‘Yes, I

will become a member!’ How could I resist the God who works in such mysterious – and mischievous – ways?

Sometime after becoming a member, a High Cross elder asked if I would consider being nominated for eldership. This time I was absolutely certain... ‘No!’ But the elder was insistent. ‘You can’t just say no. You have to go away and think about it, pray about it, and then come back with a response... And if your answer is ‘No!’, it’s still ‘Yes!’ So I went away and prayed and thought and wrestled. I was pretty certain this was not my calling, but I didn’t feel I was getting a clear answer from God, just a clear answer from within myself! In the end, I made a deal with God: ‘Ok, I don’t think this is for me, but I will let my name go forward. If I am not elected, there will be no hard feelings... I will simply accept it as confirmation of what I already know. But, if somehow I am elected, I will accept that maybe this is your will, and I will serve to the best of my ability.’ What can I say? I was elected!

Over the years my journey with High Cross led down all kinds of paths. I was a teacher in the Junior Church; I became a leader in the annual holiday club, eventually going on to jointly co-ordinate the project; I joined the team of leaders for the annual Devon youth residential; I helped devise and lead house groups, encouraging people to explore faith through honest conversations.

In the year 2000 I was appointed as the church’s ‘Ministry Enabler’; this part-time post involved supporting and enabling the ministries of the church, and could largely be shaped by the giftings of the post-holder. Apparently, one of my strengths is the gift of persuasion (...some might say ‘bullying with a smile!’) So, I found myself encouraging and enabling different groups and individuals to actively participate in the life of the church and to put their faith into action

You Speak

A hint.
A whisper.
A fleeting thought.
The slightest breath.
A nudge;
a niggle.
Randoms intersect,
connect,
fall slowly into place.
Coincidence.
A silent voice –
persistent,
insistent.
A glimpse;
an echo –
in heart & mind
echoing still.
A something –
occurring,
recurring.
Sometimes.
All the time.
Ignored.
Drowned out.
Fades in,
fades out -
but there.
Still there.
Through the silence,
beneath the noise –
in life & love,
through highs & lows -
still there.
Just there.
You speak.

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out in the community. The High Cross gospel concerts were a particular highlight. I would recruit participants, encourage collaborations, invite people to try new things; listen to them, practise with them, offer constructive criticism, and try to enable people to give of their best. My heart would sing as individuals started out focused on what they couldn't do, then found confidence to take to the stage and deliver performances they did not realise they had inside them. This is what I was good at! After some time I encouraged the church to take on a new venture – a yearly 'International Day'. Whilst extremely diverse, the church's cultural mix comprised roughly one-third Ghanaians, just under one-third Jamaicans, then a diverse mix of people from other parts of Africa, the Caribbean, Britain and the world. It was easy for those groups with a smaller representation to feel overlooked and sometimes invisible. The International Days were an opportunity to showcase and highlight all the various cultures. The events included a garden party with a variety of cultural activities, and a food hall featuring the heritage and food of five different countries. An evening concert deliberately included contributions from those backgrounds which were less well-represented in the church. The International Days proved very popular with both High Cross and the local community, and went some way towards making the various cultural groups feel both recognised and valued.

Other aspects of my work as Ministry Enabler included attempting to foster deeper links between High Cross and a Black Pentecostal congregation who used the premises on a Sunday afternoon. When a faith-based adult education group were seeking a base in Tottenham, I was part of the negotiations which saw them move into one of the church's halls; I became their main point of contact, sometimes liaising closely with staff members of different faith backgrounds. During much of the time that I was employed by High Cross, I also worked part-time for a playgroup which occupied parts of the church building from Monday to Friday; as is often the case, relationships between host and tenant groups could sometimes be strained; I took on the task of advocating for both parties, trying to foster a healthy relationship between the two. I was also closely involved in Christians Together in Tottenham, the local ecumenical group, organising and supporting work between the various local churches.

bello Karen... this is God calling!
'Here I am, Lord;
is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord,
if you lead me;
I will hold your people in my heart.'¹

I love that hymn. Back at High Cross, I would sing those words and feel something stir in my heart! But as I often advise, be careful what you say within God's hearing... because I think God heard me singing and took me at my word. This hymn was one of the reasons I had said 'Yes!' to church membership; years later, it would play its part again!

While working part-time for the church and part-time for the playgroup, I increasingly felt I was being called to... something! Something 'more', something 'deeper' – I couldn't really articulate it, and in truth, I didn't want to. I didn't know what 'it' was, but I felt fairly certain it would involve disrupting my life, and I wasn't up for that. So, although I could hear the call, in effect I put my fingers in my ears and said 'la la la' to drown out the sound! But God wouldn't quit! When I refused to answer the voices within, I started to experience voices from outside. Different members of the church approached me independently enquiring whether I had considered going into ministry, encouraging me to explore the call. As with eldership, this was not a road I wanted to travel, but in the end I felt I had to be true to the promise 'I will go, if you lead me', so I listened to the various voices and candidated for the ministry of Church Related Community Work (CRCW).

The CRCW ministry is very small, and I was one of only two URC students in my year-group at Northern College in Manchester. The course included theology modules studied alongside students of Word and Sacraments, plus modules focused more specifically on community work. All areas of the course required 'theological reflection' – trying to make sense of the situation in light of what we know about God... and sometimes modifying what we *think* we know about God in light of what we discern through our

¹ From the hymn 'I, the Lord of sea and sky', ©1981 Daniel Schutte and New Dawn Music

reflections! I thoroughly enjoyed the whole experience. I enjoyed being encouraged to look at the Bible from different perspectives; I enjoyed questioning, unpacking so much of what I'd ever learnt and trying to fathom what I really thought and believed. Some of my fellow students found this totally unnerving; everything of which they had been certain was being questioned, and they felt their faith was being undermined. But for me it was freedom. I felt I could finally breathe. I had never had that sense of certainty, now so many of the issues with which I'd silently wrestled were on the table and open for discussion, and I loved it. I even enjoyed writing my assignment submissions; quite often they were like a personal testimony exploring where I had been and trying to discern where I was going. I was ever thankful that my explorations seemed to make sense to my tutors, and I passed all modules well.

God speaks to different people in different ways, and I believe God often speaks to me through a contrary streak in my personality. If a particular prospect causes my mind to scream 'No!', I acknowledge this is probably something I am being called to do. So it was during my training for ministry. Whilst on placement, I was encouraged to volunteer with the Hackney Winter Night Shelter, a project in which local churches work together to provide hot dinners, breakfast and overnight accommodation for homeless individuals during the coldest months of the year. I was filled with dread at the prospect of close proximity to street-sleepers who might look and smell unsavoury, but I could hear God speaking to me, challenging me, asking if I was really going to set this as the limit to how far I would follow in Jesus' footsteps. So, whilst most volunteers staffed either the dinner, overnight, or breakfast shift, I volunteered to cover all three. I served meals, sat at the table, took turns with a colleague to ensure that all was quiet through the night. Some of the shelter guests were, indeed, very dirty; others were not. In time, I learned to overcome my issues; I still had my hang-ups, but they took second place to the common humanity in each person. I started to recognise how easily 'this could be me':

I recall one night a particular guest decided he wanted to leave the shelter to catch a train to Southend. 'John' was clearly a drinker, and it was easy to assume he had brought his homelessness on himself. But it was a freezing night, and I knew the train station was closed. I also knew that if John left, we were not permitted to

re-admit him. So I sat up through the night talking to John about anything and everything, trying to distract him from leaving. I learned that Southend had been the place of happy family trips during John's childhood. I learned that John's world had been shattered when his beloved dad left for work and simply did not come back, having set up home with another woman. I learned how John felt rejected when his mum found a new partner, and he had gone off the rails, repeatedly getting into trouble; that he had left home as a teenager and turned to drink. John later met a partner, got married and fathered two children, but unable to quit drinking, he lost his job, his marriage subsequently crumbled, and he lost contact with his children. John wanted to get to Southend to be in the only place he remembered being completely happy. That night, I learned that John was more a victim of his circumstances than author of his fate. Like Job's friends in the Old Testament, I learned the importance of listening without judgment. I learned humility.

A few years later these lessons would stand me in good stead when I undertook a short overseas placement with a project called Jamaica AIDS Support. Again, I did not want to go, so knew I must. I heard first-hand the stories of people living with or affected by HIV; the persecution suffered by gay and transgender Jamaicans; the homophobia which contributed to transient and covert relationships, which in turn contributed to the spread of the HIV virus. I visited with a young man close to death while his mother tended to him and spoke about her son with total devotion. I could do nothing to change the circumstances of any of these people – so I learned again the importance of simply being there.

moving on

I had not wanted to leave Tottenham; this was one of the reasons for my reluctance to explore ministry. Initially I refused to think about the prospect – it was the only way I could allow myself to go forwards, but towards the end of my training I realised that I had to contemplate leaving. Many of the people in URC circles knew how attached I was to Tottenham, and the word had gone around that 'she won't leave!' As luck would have it, there was a vacancy in London, but my Moderator refused to allow me to be limited to only one option. He encouraged me to look at the London vacancy,

and another in Luton; 'Just go and look; get a feel for them, and then decide.' To be honest, on reading the two profiles I was immediately drawn to the Luton project, and the visits simply confirmed what I'd already felt in my heart. But, to seal the deal, I discovered that commuting from my home in Tottenham took pretty much the same length of time for both projects. So, Luton it was. That said, commuting only lasted around six months. Silently, imperceptibly, God brought me to the place where I knew in myself that it was time to make the break with my former home, so I packed up and moved to Luton.

Going to Luton was like entering a different world. I was called to work with an ecumenical group of churches¹ located in the Bury Park and Beech Hill areas of Luton, where the local population is predominantly Pakistani Muslim. High Cross had always had a fairly large congregation, including many children and young people; the churches in my new patch were predominantly shrinking, aging congregations, some with no children, others with just a handful. The average age in most was 70+. Many of the folks in my churches have been there for the greater part of their lives, and have fond memories of attending Sunday School in a time when the churches were full. Now, they are struggling. Numbers have dwindled, and the local area is almost unrecognisable as the place they have known, loved and called home. My brief was to encourage and enable the churches to engage meaningfully with this changed local community, to foster a new sense of purpose by exploring what it might mean to 'be church' in a place like this. I don't know whether it was God's sense of humour allowing someone green-from-college to come into this context, but here is another of my attributes... I like a challenge! Moreover, something felt 'right' about Luton.

Previously voted the crappiest town in Britain², Luton was frequently bad-mouthed – feared or hated by many people, labelled 'a hotbed of terrorism' due to the presence of a small number of vociferous Islamic extremists whose actions gave rise to the formation of the far-right English Defence League (EDL). This

¹ The Bury Park Beech Hill Council of Churches comprises one URC, two Methodist Churches, an Anglican parish (two churches), a Catholic church and a non-denominational Asian Christian Fellowship.

² *Crap Towns II: The Nation Decides*, S. Jordison & D. Kieran, October 2004

poor press stirred something in me: This was the kind of negative accolade heaped upon Tottenham, the place of the Broadwater Farm ‘riots’ – always pluralised by onlookers! – and yet, having lived there my whole life, I knew a different Tottenham – the place I called home. I could hear echoes of Nathanael’s disdain when he exclaimed ‘Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?’ (John 1:46). So, I wanted to answer Nathanael’s question on behalf of Nazareth, Tottenham and Luton – ‘Yes, come and see!’ So I set about exploring what the churches and I might do together in partnership with God.

In Luton, I work as part of a Christian community development programme called Grassroots, fostering positive relationships between Luton’s diverse cultural and faith communities. The small Grassroots team is itself diverse, including White British, Black Caribbean, Indian and African Asian; Catholic, United Reformed Church, Muslim, and individuals of no particular faith affiliation. Anything and everything is an excuse for bringing people together – celebrations of One World Week, a campaign which saw Luton declared a Fairtrade Town, annual Peace Walks, archery, circle dancing, women’s events and much more. It has been quite an adventure getting alongside my churches, encouraging and enabling them to engage with each other and with the wider community, often by participating in the various Grassroots initiatives. We have secured funding to run projects hosted by the churches themselves, inviting members of diverse faiths and cultures to gather around cultural foods and conversations. As I reflect on some of these activities, I am struck by how much of who I am and what I do in Luton is fed by my experiences in Tottenham – the significance of colour and culture, how different faiths regard and relate to each other, issues related to being in the minority or the majority; the skills developed getting alongside individuals and groups at High Cross. Everything seems to fit together. Apparently, God may have had a plan!

A significant part of my work in Luton has involved engaging with the town’s growing Roma community¹. I had no prior experience of work with the Roma, and no desire to learn. (There goes that contrary streak again!) God apparently had different ideas, and I found myself heavily engaged in the establishing of a Roma fellowship worshipping

¹ In Luton, the Roma are predominantly Romanian gypsies.

Who do they say I am?

I say I am Karen
And I want to be free
To define who I am
And simply be me...
To look in life's closet
And check out the shelf;
Be clothed in the labels
I choose for myself.

Daughter, sister,
Mother, all three –
I'm nothing
Without my family,
Who've shaped from the start,
Whether known or unknown,
The me that I am
Who is me alone.

But step through the door
And out of the fold...
I encounter a world
Of labels untold,
Which sees not the person
I think to be me,
Ascribing instead
What they want me to be.

I say I am Karen,
And in yesteryear
Thought my name was the only
Label to wear,
Till they labelled me 'coloured'
And made me believe
'My sort' was not good,
Making heart and soul grieve;
And tho I could try
I was not good enough-
So I learned I am Black,
Made of sterner stuff!
Learned to think, learned to speak
Learned to know my own mind –
To choose my own labels:
But did I leave self behind?

I say I am Karen.
They ask 'Karen from where?'
And I know, for I've learned,
I'm not Karen from here;
So I sift through the labels
Within and without,
Seeking one which will speak

Of the me I'm about:
I know I'm not English –
That's one I won't own,
Tho this country is all
I have ever known;
Black British!
Caribbean!
They're labels I bear
To place for someone
A girl from nowhere.

I say I am Karen,
And I have one child;
But seeing no husband
They think me defiled.
They label me fallen;
They think I was shamed,
And await my account
For the sin they have named.
Sometimes I can see
The confused, concerned eye
As they pointlessly wait

I say I am Karen,
And I have one child;
But seeing no husband
They think me defiled.
They label me fallen;
They think I was shamed,
And await my account
For the sin they have named.
Sometimes I can see
The confused, concerned eye
As they pointlessly wait
For a contrite reply...
Then, yearning a picture
More tidy somehow,
Declare 'that was your past,
But you're much different now!'

So with head held high
And back drawn straight
I claim the label
They want me to hate:
I AM a single mother
A truth I lay bare –
Call me 'problem',
Call me 'issue'
Call me 'sinner' –
Just dare!
I don't say I am sorry,

Won't hang my head low,
Won't side-step, nor fret
About what who might know –
For I am who I am
And long-since came to see
I'm alright with God,
And God's alright with me.

I say I am Karen
But the me I embrace
Is so much a product
Of labels I face;
Makes me see and peel back
At least some that I use
And walk, just a while,
In another's shoes.

I say I am Karen.
I am me alone –
A complex concoction
Of labels I own;
Of those I've rejected
Or skewed to my way,
And still others I'm sifting
To see what they say.
Yet in wearing, not wearing,
Those labels, I see
Sometimes I lose sight of me.

© Karen Campbell, 2010

in the premises of one of my congregations, trying to help the group move from chaos towards stability. It was both rewarding and frustrating as I sought to confront my own prejudices, challenging my churches to do the same, encouraged the Roma fellowship to rise above the negative stereotypes which preceded them whilst watching them repeatedly defeat themselves through destructive and antisocial behaviours. I devised and led a children's programme, worked with the leadership, advocated on behalf of the Roma congregation to the host church and vice versa. Again, all of this had echoes of my work in Tottenham, my Winter Night Shelter and Jamaica placements. Is this always what God had in mind for me?

more than 'me'

When I completed my training I became the only serving Black CRCW. By default, I was also the only Black, woman CRCW. Black, woman ministers are a rarity in the URC; I was aware of this fact somewhere in my subconscious, but had not really given it much thought. I usually only think of myself as being 'me'; over time, however, I have come to realise that I embody something bigger than just myself: During my time with High Cross, one or other of the older Caribbean women would encourage me, reflecting 'It's too late for us, but you're doing this on our behalf.' This was both affirming and yet weighty: It wasn't just about me! I was carrying

something of the hopes and aspirations of those who had nurtured and encouraged me. Beyond the local church too I found myself drawn into the life of the denomination – sitting on committees, drafted into groups. I often felt an internal dilemma – do you want me because I tick the ‘ethnic minority’ box and the ‘woman’ box, or do you really believe that I, Karen Campbell, have a valuable contribution to make? At times I really was not sure; I would sit in meetings feeling perplexed, wondering ‘What on earth is this about?’ But I would listen and think, and only speak when I felt I had something constructive to say. It was something of a relief when colleagues reflected that though I did not speak often, I always spoke helpfully. Thank you Lord! The truth is, there are times when I feel have to ‘represent’. Whilst I may not always feel personally drawn towards a particular group or task, I feel a responsibility to step up to opportunities for Black people and Black women to have a voice; more than just ‘being there’, I feel a pressure to speak intelligently, to show that we have something of value to contribute.

Since completing my studies, the sense of responsibility as a Black woman has deepened. My journey to ministry has been relatively smooth. At every stage there have been people pushing me on, recognising something in me and encouraging me to move forwards. The greatest obstacles I faced have been from within – my own doubts, fears and anxieties. I soon came to realise that this is not the experience of other Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women in the church. Some feel they have no voice or status within their local congregations; others feel isolated or unsupported, trying to fit in with the dominant cultures. Some experience a strong sense of call, but face ‘gatekeepers’ who refuse to let them progress. All of this makes me acknowledge a sense of privilege in being where I am, doing what I am doing. I feel a responsibility to share my story, hear the stories of other BAME women, offer whatever I may have to redress the current situation in which my positive experience seems to contradict the norm. This is the reason for my involvement in Cascades of Grace, seeking to network BAME women in the United Reformed Church for mutual support and encouragement. I am one of the founding members of Cascades of Grace, and have been the convenor since we started our work in 2011.

so, here I am

On reflection, I realise my journey towards ministry is characterised by holding different strands in tension – the yearning for certainty whilst feeling ill at ease unless wrestling and questioning; accepting that the things I least want to do are probably exactly where God is leading; the desire to simply ‘be me’, whilst recognising that my colour and gender speak a language and dictate an agenda of their own. I am a minister of the church, but I am not a huge fan of organised religion. I am increasingly dismayed by the things human beings will say, believe and enact against others in the name of faith, and in the name of the God who calls us to love both God and neighbour. I am convinced of the reality of God and God’s kingdom, and am equally convinced that God reveals glimpses of truth to different people in different ways according to God’s will. I am a Christian, and I am also content for others to practise that faith through which their glimpse of God is revealed. I feel no compulsion to bring people either into the Church or the Christian faith, but I do feel called to put my faith into action amongst those I encounter, to share something of God’s kingdom with all people, recognise something of God in all people, encourage all people to be the best version of whoever they have been called to be by the God who created us all.

Journeying in Multiple Worlds



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“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”
[John 10:10 NRSV]

location matters

Locating one's self matters. None of us are disembodied spirits. We are flesh and blood, bound by culture and time. My self-understanding as a minister and theologian is shaped by a multiplicity of realities/markers in my journey of faith. It is impossible to jump over my shadow. So allow me to locate myself: I am not Jamaican but I am from the Caribbean. I am not Brazilian but I am South American. I am not British nor European, but I pay UK, Dutch and French taxes. I look Indian but I am not a Hindu or Muslim, though my ancestors were and some family members still are. My accent is as deceptive as the places I have lived in. I am a complex Diasporan Caribbean traveller, an unintentional missionary called to serve as a minister and a moderator of the GA of the United Reformed Church. I understand my calling to be that of one who attempts to walk the way of God in Christ – a vocation of dislocation, of moving out of zones of comfort, and delighting in the “positive vibrations” of displacement for the sake of the gospel. Hence, what I share will be influenced by my interfaith optics, minority perspectives and multiple identities.

where it all began

I am from Guyana and more specifically from Skeldon in Berbice – an area in Guyana noted for producing sugar, rice, lumber, and a wide array of vegetable. Perhaps what may be more known about Berbice are some of her well-known cricketers! In my younger days, Skeldon would have been considered rural. And this rural dimension of my background has played a significant part in my love and respect for nature and the environment and in my creative gift of composing poetry and short stories. It has also been significant in my understanding of economic realities, poverty, and exploitation. From my family ancestral home, you can look across the Corentyne river and see Suriname. I suspect that this is one of the reasons why I love crossing waters/rivers, imagining all sorts of stories and adventures and a strong desire to travel across to the ‘other side’. The latter has always intrigued me growing up.

*multiple religious heritages and
spiritual blessings*

With my other seven siblings, I am a progeny of the history of colonial indentureship (or modified slavery) of Indians from the subcontinent – that Caribbean slice with all its complexities. It is not insignificant that an ancestor of a former PM of Britain (William Gladstone), had a hand in this project making a handsome profit in the process. My ancestors' faith and faithfulness, their values, worldviews, traditions and cultural practices have had to find creative ways to re-negotiate itself on an alien landscape which became 'new home'.

Growing up in a context where my grandparents, parents and siblings on both sides are practising Hindus, Muslims and Christians, religion was certainly the most observable fact of daily life. In this reconfigured landscape, it was natural to follow one grandparent and her Hindu rituals of morning pujas (prayers), another to church (Black step-grandfather), and yet another (maternal) to the Mosque for afternoon prayers, or for midday prayers with my Muslim grandfather, even while working the rice fields. Religious diversity was a given in that very plural community in Guyana. My faith and spirituality has been informed and shaped by impulses from these religious traditions. I can see this in my love of icons, chanting, story-telling and my confidence to draw freely from various religious texts. From Hinduism especially, I learnt the importance of catering for all the senses in worship – all at once to help the devotee or believer "rise to the awareness of standing in the presence of the Divine". Another important development in my faith journey during this early period was the insistence on the

Christmas Eve

Like a huge breadfruit
shining brightly ripe
a friendly moon hopefully stares
as candle lighted splattered stars
twinkle their message of love.

Heavy winds unleash its power
over a sleeping land
as palm branches and lemon trees
dance to its inviting music.

Then silence prevails
solitary
anticipating
patiently squeezing back its breath
to welcome the saviour
bursting forth from a watery bag
through biting pain, blood
and the cry of painful joy as the
babe's cry relieves its mother's pain.

Welcome to your home
bundle of human life
You are our flesh
our blood
our lungs
our hearts
You are our saving hope.

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relationship between faith and faithfulness that I experienced in my family across all three faiths! Very early, I was taught by living examples that faith must be lived. My parents and grandparents home became a refugee corner for travellers, beggars, or those who were hungry; a refuge for beaten-up spouses; a kind of discussion corner on politics, trade union activities, religions and much more. And not surprisingly at age of 13 I joined with other students in supporting our teachers for a better wage and squatted on a piece of land that was sold by the Church to a rich businessman instead of a group of poor farmers. My penchant to ‘take on’ injustices and to name the “beasts” that deny people full life goes all the way back to my family life in that small village in Guyana.

calling and training

I was baptized in the local Anglican church through the influence of my African-Guyanese foster grandfather. When I accepted the call to become a minister my parents and grandparents were not surprised. They told me that this was why at my baptism I was given the names Michael Nathaniel Emmanuel Samuel. I now only use the first two! Besides, on both sides of the other religious heritages we have had pundits and imams in the family. After completing Secondary School, it was necessary for me to work in order to save funds for further studies as my parents had not the means to fund such. I worked as a Sugar Technologist in the laboratory of local Sugar Factory. At the same time, I was totally involved in the work of our nearby Lutheran church through its active youth work and often wondered about ministry. I suffered an ambivalence though as I also wanted to work in the Sugar Industry. I was unable to make up my mind on either. Feeling desperate over my indecision, I suspect my mother and grandmothers prayed with all the intensity they could muster to help me resolve any hesitancy and ambivalence. Whatever they prayed for, the arrival of a new minister (1971) and his encouragement saw me offering myself for training towards full-time ministry in the Lutheran Church in Guyana and was off to Jamaica.

The four years of training were just great and eye-opening. While I performed well as an ordinand (I had some great teachers) excelling especially in biblical studies and liturgics, I grew stronger

in my penchant for political engagement, advocating for poor, drawing on Caribbean resources for theological reflections and getting involved in all sorts of agitations on the college and University campus. I remember the two first published pieces I did



was on a 'ministry with poor' (about a group of extremely impoverished people just up the road from our nice and convenient accommodation) and Bob Marley's theology. I was considered an 'odd student' and many perhaps wondered (not out aloud) whether

I was ministerial material. I suspect much of what took my interest (like a placement in an authentic Rastafarian community) confirmed their thinking. And even when I graduated, my Church was not convinced that I knew enough about Luther (though I read all his table-talks in English) to be proper Lutheran. In the end the Lutheran Church ‘sinned boldly’ by ordaining me in July 1980 and letting me loose to minister.

doing ministry in contexts

Guyana

My ministry with the Lutheran Church in Guyana (1980) saw me working in five congregations along the rice belt on the Corentyne Coast, in the Berbice River (12 churches) running into the interior of Guyana, in the largest Lutheran Church in Guyana (Ebenezer) and as director of Christian Education. I quickly learnt that ‘punters in the pews’ had very little time for fancy theological expositions. They were keener to relate the biblical story to their concrete reality of distress and penury. Nothing in my theological education prepared me to respond to suicides, family feuds, deliver babies in remote villages, campaigning for water supply and electricity provision and collecting information for the Guyana Human Rights Association with regard to police brutality! At Ebenezer congregation I gained invaluable experience on the art of listening and dialogue, caring and loving in spite of insults, what it means to be open and sensitive, helping folks to cope with anger, and praying very hard in a situation of conflict! As the director of Christian education I wrote, commissioned, edited and produced a wide cross-section of literature for all age groups and to be used ecumenically. My brief also included responsibility for annual Youth Camps, directing a Lay Training Institute, and organising conferences for ministers. A confession: it was during this time that I also got involved in supporting the late Dr. Walter Rodney’s Working People’s Alliance Party against the Burnham regime. I was suspected for using the Church’s Christian Education department to publish subversive literature. A few raids never produced any evidence!

Grenada

After higher studies in Jamaica, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, I moved to Grenada and the Presbyterian Church of Grenada. In this small and active Christian community of four congregations and two schools, I served as moderator, got actively involved in ecumenical lay training development, chaired the work of Agency for Rural Transformation, directed a grassroots rural association, chaired the Council of Churches, and was politically active in taking on the various governments of Grenada and the IMF with their mandatory 'structural adjustment programme'. I was also active in accompanying the 'political prisoners' of the former socialist government following the Grenada invasion debacle. Grenada was another massive learning context for me having to collaborate with colleagues to: create and foster an atmosphere where people could work together [nation and churches were very divided], enabling and equipping the active participation of the laity in the whole life of the Church and minister in a context of great disparity between rich and poor. The latter was a tremendous challenge for one whose ministry has been thus far characterized by a strong prophetic dimension.

Curacao

Ebenezer was the English speaking congregation of the United Protestant Church of Curacao. It is one of the few places I have worked where there is no shortage of gifted people and where people never felt inhibited to come forward to share those gifts. People rightly spoke of the warmth of worship, the welcome they received, the friendliness of the people and Ebenezer as where the Spirit roamed freely and mischievously. I recall one occasion when a Dutchman and his wife joined us for worship. Ebenezer was the church they would come to when on holiday. He had stopped visiting Church in Holland. On this particular Sunday the music, singing and preaching were electrifying. The gentleman was moved to come forward with his wife to share in Holy Communion. When I came to him with the bread, he said "Dominee, I have not been confirmed". I responded: Do you know why you are standing here?" He nodded "Yes". I simply said: "Then eat man". That was a turning point for

that man's spiritual journey. Our sons seem to remember all the good food, the parties, the friends, the eating, and the swimming – even some of the Papiamentu (native language). I too recall the food and eating. This is a strongpoint of the community. And why should it not be so? The table is at the heart of how Christians should “walk the talk” in and out of church. It is not only about the freshly baked loaf of bread that members would get for the agape feast; or the Soup Kitchen and my insistence that we need soup with “obstacles” in it. It is about the Spirit of generosity, which overflowed at Ebenezer. Then there were the memories of theological learning and conversion. I recall, when together with the elders we decided to let the children not only come up for a blessing at communion, but to also receive bread. What I never bargained for was my son, William's intervention. After receiving his piece of bread he held on to the rail and insisted that he also wanted the wine while the other children were already in their seat. After a brief struggle Leonora was able to release his grip from the rail and calm his crying. But, it was not the end of the matter: when he got home he went to the refrigerator and took his share of the grape juice and then said to me: “Papa, the blood of Jesus” – and drank all up. That was a conversion moment for me in terms of children coming to the table for communion – which we encouraged the church to consider. And they did!

Britain

I never imagined that ministry will take me to Britain. In fact, I accompanied Leonora (September 1999) and our sons as she was called to minister in the United Reformed Church (URC). I was the minister's spouse when we arrived in Birmingham and found ourselves ‘at home in a strange place’. All the usual adjustments aside, we were warmly welcomed. Birmingham and the Church community have been good to us as a family. It was not long before I was received as a minister of the URC, served only a few years in a local charge (Bishop Latimer LEP) before I was called to serve as a URC tutor at Queens Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education and Training Officer of the West Midlands Synod. After eight years, I moved to an assembly appointed post (Racial Justice and Multicultural Ministry, now Global and Intercultural Ministries) during which time I was also

Wind-Rush (A Pentecost Reflection)

It was a carnival-like atmosphere
celebration was in the air
just the day for diversity
as people with strange foreign names
from cities far off swarmed in.
Luke' geography of the known world
may have been limited,
yet one can sense a mosaic of cultures.

The lonely little group,
friends of Jesus
never imagined what will happen,
the dance of their lives - a conspiracy,
that breathing together (from conspire)
turning their lives inside out
fired up for the adventure of their lives.

The wind-rush God re-directs the
Babel trajectory of homogenisation
with its petrifying uniformity.
In hurricane force wind of flaming tongues,
God's "YES"
to the diversities of all life is loud.
The Wind-rush One does not speak one
language
and is not in the business of oneness.

Dangerously restless,
is the Wind-rush One.
She disrupts our 'neat categories',
releasing us to 'catch afire'
with new life and new spirits.
Breathe on us, O Wind-Rush Spirit, and turn us
into an ecstatic house of living stones.

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elected to serve as moderator of the General Assembly of the URC (2012–2014). It is the most number of years (17) I have spent in such a diverse ministry in one country. I have learnt much, given much (often very costly because of what I embody and the nature of my work), and have much to reflect upon. Some of this I will pick up in the next section. In terms of contributions, I would consider these to be the significant ones:

writing from the specific perspective of a Minority Ethnic in the URC; contributing to ecumenical theological formation; helping the URC rethink and put in place inclusive practices; offering a different kind of leadership in anxious times; helping the URC to rediscover the spirit of generosity; calling on all to be mutually inconvenienced for a gospel of full life for all; and making timely interventions in challenging the Church.

walking the talk of the Jesus way: some observations

multiple belonging

I have been blessed with the gift of multiple religious heritages with it all the extras, including the demands and tensions. Explaining to others that I have no choice but to live in the fullness of two or three simultaneously makes no sense to the “mono” mind-sets and less than generous orthodoxy of purists. In retrospect, I can now see how fortunate my siblings and I were growing in such a context – a reality now for many in the United Kingdom. For those who have experience a sense of the Holy and the presence of the Divine (God) on multiple holy grounds, an ongoing and existential internal dialogue takes shape. The reach of this dialogical embodiment is there in my theologising, preaching, teaching, moderating, and relating. It becomes the lens through which I have sought to engage with most of life. A journey, shaped by diverse religious impulses, multiplicity and hybridity has enabled me to understand my own faith with a confidence that at the same time demands that I understand it differently. I sense that it is as a result of these impulses that I am able to hold an expansive, generous and open view of the Divine. It may also be one reason why I find notions of purity, oneness and uniformity limiting the plurality within the manifold fullness and inexhaustibility of the Divine. My plea has been and is for us to rediscover the grandeur and the *pleroma* of the Divine and the Divine’s work of grace throughout the whole of creation.

spin-off questions

Given the above, questions I have engaged included conversion and salvation. My transition and a deepening of my experience of the Divine happened in the context of secondary school education only then administered by Churches. It is only later and in conversation with my siblings and peers some of whom have ‘returned’ to the religions of our ancestors that I am able to see how we all negotiated spaces to move between/among our multiple religious and complex heritages. My study and teaching of theology, Caribbean and Interfaith Studies and postcolonial hermeneutics in the UK, gave me the tools to critically reflect further on this. I am of the view that a theology of conversion which insists on a total divesting of oneself from one’s cultural and historical roots smacks of both arrogance and insecurity. Perhaps, conversion is a continuous movement into a deeper experience of the Divine, rather than leaving something behind. There is nothing like a straightforward conversion or transition: it is messy and layered with ‘thick’ narratives. I am afraid that Churches are yet to provide us ‘multiple belongers’ with new language, theological reframing, and space to thrive! Ecclesial and religious traditions are yet to find a theology to touch and embrace people with multiple religious identities and experiences – travellers, not cemented long-term boarders.

negotiating tensions and learning points

To be clear: inheritors of ‘multiple religious socialization’ do not necessarily despise the religious tradition they have ‘moved’ from. I am certainly more at home in the Christian tradition, but not necessarily in opposition of what I have moved from. That would amount to denial, self-hate and erasure of too much of what is culturally part and parcel of who I am. Hence, over the years I subtly practiced theological self-control, re-orientation of conscience and the development of ‘multiple religious belonging’, with a commitment to the Jesus Way, while being open to the unpredictable movement of God’s Spirit. So, in my ministry and especially in conversations around interfaith and intercultural matters, I have focused on reframing questions by considering statements. For instance: that salvation belongs only to God; that

we do not possess salvation, but only participate in it; that we do not offer, but only witness to salvation; and that any decision as to who is saved is the business of the Divine. The challenge is in the practice and how we live and embody these statements in the light of real flesh and blood religious neighbours around us and in our practice of faith and faithfulness. The intention being a movement away from a preoccupation with an exclusive view of Jesus as the only Way, towards a focus on living the Jesus Way, premised on love for God/love for neighbour and the offer of full life for *all*. God's grace abounds and it is no one's responsibility to dispense, except the Divine. We merely, as imperfect vessels, witness to this fact of overflowing grace! That demands humility and asks us to explore new metaphors and theological language to articulate what is at the core of our belief *with commitment and openness*. Are we able and willing to improve our "grammar" in the articulation of our faith and practice of faithfulness? God's inexhaustible fullness demands no less.

multicultural Church, intercultural habit

That's us the United Reformed Church: at least our best intentions. Making these intentions become real, where all are 'mutually inconvenienced' continue to be an uphill struggle. Even when recognised (our multicultural reality), how to re-configure our life together (our relating) remains a massive challenge. It is scandalous how we all go on about mission as incarnational, and remain terrified about including the diversity of real flesh around us – because they are not like us! Witness that is mutual, reciprocal and interdependent with the strangers in our midst continues to be a struggle. Whether we are able move beyond binary notions of culturally dominant groups as hosts, and migrant and minority peoples as guests to embrace God's generosity where God is the host and all are invited by the Spirit to participate with humility and mutuality in God's mission remains a challenge. The challenge as I see it is how to re-negotiate belonging around a common table that honours a partnership of equals in the midst of our diversity. The fact that the URC elected me (a minority) as a moderator of its General Assembly is not necessarily indicative that more space around the table has been created or is being re-negotiated to

include the difference and culturally shaped giftings I brought. To be accepted and to be listened to, I have had to largely fit into a white-male-extrovert-hetero-sexual-abled-bodied framework. The theology undergirding our whole life together is still euro-centric. The habit of all around the table being *mutually inconvenienced* for the sake of economy of the host (God in Christ), and in the specific context of finding a new identity, is proving to be far too uncomfortable and demanding! An authentic opening-up towards migrant Christians or newer migrant Christian communities and diverse groups has to mean a process of radical re-definition of our own heritages and identities. I cannot honestly say this is where the URC is. If a church starts to welcome its BAME members as equal partners, it cannot just assimilate them into the existing structure and operate “business as usual”. Belonging together must be renegotiated! Learning how to generously do our God-talk together, without reducing the practices of the “newcomer” as underdeveloped, conservative, childish or those of the “host” churches as impoverished spiritually, is an urgent task. We are all in need here!

Postscript – unending words

I am often reminded of Jesus’ invitation to “launch out into the deep”, alongside the ways he negotiated contradictions and tensions – all the way to a cross and an empty tomb. In this invitation of Jesus and his “walking the talk”, I found openings that enabled me to find ways to let go of fossilized religious categories and still hold on to my faith in God in Christ (what I term the Jesus Way). The Divine does not need our protection or defence! My understanding of the Jesus Way which I strive to follow, as an embodied being with a variety of cultural and religious impulses and limitation, is that it is one of abundance and generosity. The image I get is that of an extravagant God who is not stingy, mean or interested in quick answers to complex questions driven by an obsession for stricture and certainty. The picture before me is that of the Divine who surprises the guests to the extent that they can exclaim “you have kept the best wine for the last”! The above are the key theological descriptors that continue to inform my contributions to the United Reformed Church!

