

Multi-Ethnic Worship

Amrit Vani Teri, Amrit Vani Teri came the sung call from the worship leader seated on the floor, Amrit Vani Teri, Amrit Vani Teri came the reply from the congregation many of whom were also seated on the floor. In the background the drone of a sitar could be heard above the sound of the tabla drum. However, this was neither India nor an Asian congregation in another country; this is Sunday morning in a West London Baptist church. However, all is not how you may have pictured this in your mind. The English worship leader does not speak Hindi (although her pronunciation is very good) the sitar drone sound is coming from a mobile phone app and although there are around twenty Asians in the congregation most of the adults present were born in Africa or the Caribbean.

Twenty-seven years ago when I became the pastor of Greenford Baptist Church (GBC) it was a traditional church with an almost completely white English congregation. Today you will find people from over 40 nations meeting together to worship God using a whole variety of languages in their worship and prayer, among them are converts from Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism. In other articles I have told the story of the start of the journey into building a multi-ethnic congregation, in this article I want to explore our journey into multi-ethnic worship.

“After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb” (Rev. 7 v 9). This is our destiny. Every time I read this verse I am struck by the inclusive nature of the vision, every nation, tribe, people and language. All are welcomed, none is prioritised, everybody included and involved. Many years ago as I pastored GBC and people from other nationalities started to attend I began to ask questions around how we could make sure that they were really included; not just as people on seats but as active participants and contributors. Ringing in my ears were the comments made to me by a black African deacon in a Baptist church that I had visited a number of years before. This church was hailed as a model of what a multi-ethnic church should be. However he said to me that this was not a multi-ethnic church it was a white church that black people could come along to. All the agendas were white, the worship was white, the preaching was white even the food was white. So how could we really become inclusive?

The very first step with our worship followed the performance at a church social event by a small group of our West Africans singing a few songs that they had sang at church back home. I decided to see if we could include some of these African singers into the all white English group that sang at the front on Sunday mornings. This idea was not welcomed. Our highly musically gifted white English worship leaders had a very European understanding of music and they were not willing to allow anything that was not up to what they considered to be the appropriate standard. Those West Africans who I had heard sing were not welcome in the worship team. Some could not pass the auditions, others were simply refused auditions. The two or three that did manage to get in felt sidelined and marginalised and soon left. Then I also discovered they were also not willing to rock the church boat by helping me push a more inclusive agenda as they saw themselves as foreigners who were guests here and so they needed to keep their heads down.

It was stalemate until after some unpleasant confrontation the entire leadership of the singers and musicians team resigned and left GBC. In the messy situation that followed it was possible for me to ensure the inclusion of some singers from other ethnicities and to require of the new worship leaders, who were still all white English, that we add a couple of songs originating from West Africa to our Sunday worship repertoire with the proviso that they must be sung in a style as close as possible to that “back home”. With the change in the leadership of the worship groups this was no longer seen as controversial, in fact many in the congregation welcomed it. However I needed to keep making sure that these songs were included regularly.

The next stage was getting some of those who had not been born in the UK to lead worship on a Sunday morning. With some strong leaning on people this took place, although initially those born overseas tried to lead like an English person. For example I noticed that they never included anything other than British or American songs. It took a lot of persistent encouragement from me to get them very gradually to begin to lead drawing on more of their own natural style and culture.

Over the following years we slowly included a few more songs in other, mainly African, languages but in reality we had done little more to our worship to make it genuinely inclusive than having people born outside of the UK sitting in a congregation makes the church community genuinely multi-ethnic.

By this point as the church had grown numerically and we had the finance to take on a couple of part-time staff. One was an evangelist the other, Andy, worked partly with youth but also had a brief to develop our congregational worship. We decided to invest in some training for Andy to help equip him to better help us. We first sent him on a one day training event with Resonance¹ and then afterwards he attended the World Worship Week at All Nations College. This was a week of intensive teaching on ethnomusicology, ethnodoxology and included practical examples of indigenous worship songs from around the globe. We also tasked him with attending some other churches with a very different cultural flavour to our own. Drawing from these experiences he facilitated some workshops with our other worship leaders, singers and musicians. We then asked him to use some Sunday morning services to help develop the understanding within our congregation about what the relationship between music and worship can look like.

A key part of this was exploring “heart music”, this is the music that most resonates with us. It is the music we go to for comfort and relaxation, it is the music that best expresses our emotional side. And it is therefore the sort of music that most easily helps us to engage in worshiping God. There is no right or wrong musical style, no music that is “more spiritual” there is just music that works for me as an individual and music that does not.

We decided to send as many as were willing to go from our singers, musicians and worship leaders to attend worship in congregations of other ethnicities to help them get a bigger picture of what worship can be like. We also sent Andy to do some more training, this time to do part of a unit on an MA course entitled “Worship, Music and Liturgy”. It focussed on the importance and the effect of culture, contextualization and globalization on worship, and the importance of developing a local, community-relevant expression of worship using the arts.

It is hard to describe in an article what Sunday morning worship is currently like at GBC (although you can see some glimpses on our website www.greenfordbaptist.london). Yes we sing songs in a variety of languages and styles. Yes we use languages other than English in prayer and Bible reading. Yes worship often involves movement from energetic West African style dancing all the way through to slow deliberate prostration. Yes we have an “art station” where as a part of worship people paint and draw. Yes we recognise that some people find some things helpful, others find the same thing leaves them unmoved. And yes people are free to participate or not.

What does all this achieve? Well here are a few stories.

It was a Saturday afternoon celebration of an anniversary. A couple of hundred people were present in the GBC building. As usual the worship leaders drew from a range of musical styles and languages. There was an opportunity for testimony. In the congregation was a visiting pastor, now living in the UK but he was born and grew up in Nigeria. With tears in his eyes he related that until today he had never worshipped God in his first language, he could not express how welcome he felt not just by this congregation but by God accepting him as a Yoruba.

It was a wedding service, an Indian woman from a Hindu family was marrying an English man from a Christian family; they had met in church in the UK where she was a student. Her close family had travelled from India; they had had concerns about her marrying an English Christian. One of the first songs was in Hindi with tabla drum and bells as the only instruments used. They said afterwards that they knew that their daughter was fully welcome and accepted.

It was an induction service for a new pastor at GBC. The leader of the local council was there along with some other of the local councillors and the MP. Community cohesion and reconciliation between different ethnic groups are big local issues. Within the service in addition to songs in a variety of languages the Bible was read in Nepali, different languages were used in prayer. Reconciliation and the valuing of cultural and ethnic difference was modelled. The reality of God's love and His power to bring people together was demonstrated.

We are still on a journey together, still learning, still pushing at boundaries and still making mistakes. However we have made significant progress in enabling people in our congregation to use their own heart music to worship God not only on their own but as part of gathered church, a foretaste of heaven.

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¹ Resonance (<http://www.resonancearts.net>) is a ministry of WEC which, among other things, offers training to musicians and churches in developing multi-ethnic worship.