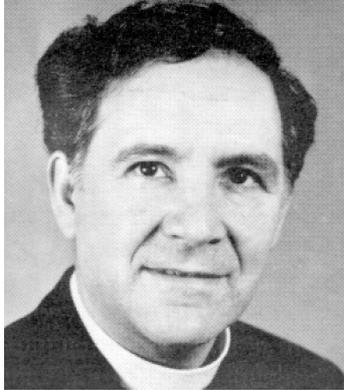


Emergence of Multicultural congregations in the LBA: Reflections on Greenford Baptist Church (1965-2015)

Fifty years ago in 1965 the Rev. E. M. Forward was the pastor of Greenford Baptist Church, having commenced his ministry in October 1958.



Rev. E. M. Forward

The existing church building had been built by the war claims commission in the 1950's and in 1965 a major extension of the building was under discussion, this was built in 1969-70. This project is evidence that the church was healthy and growing. The membership at the end of 1965 was 150. Most of those who attended the services lived locally and were white British, reflecting those who then lived in the area.

My first-hand knowledge of GBC starts from 1987. In the autumn, after a few months of conversation, I started serving as the new pastor. In many ways the church was largely unchanged from 20 years before. The format of the services followed the traditional Baptist pattern of five hymns etc. The congregation had remained almost entirely white British with just a handful of Caribbean teenagers attending the church attracted initially by the Boys and Girls Brigades. Most of those attending were from the local area but the congregation and active membership had shrunk by around a half from that of 20 years before. However, the local community had changed. There had been a substantial growth of the numbers of people living locally who had been born in India, Pakistan, the Caribbean and a small but growing number from West Africa. This change was not yet reflected in the congregation of the church.

Today GBC has over 200 members with around 450 people attending one of our services twice a month. The majority of the adults who attend on Sundays were born outside of the UK, we have people from around 45 nationalities as a regular part of our congregation, with no single nationality dominating. Our 2½--3 hour Sunday morning meetings include sung worship in a variety of languages, with songs sung in the style that they are sung "back home". A variety of styles and a mixture of languages are used for prayer, reflecting styles and languages used in the countries of origin of the people present. Leaders in almost every area of church life are drawn from a mixture of nationalities (the one exception is that both the current pastors are white British, but GBC did have a Brazilian pastor until recently).

So how did this change happen? As I look back I think that the catalyst for the initial very slow growth in the numbers of Caribbeans attending was the evangelistic activities of one of the teenagers who had been there when I arrived. Her parents were from Dominica and they were the very first black people to move into the road in Greenford where I live. They told me that those already living in the road did not welcome their arrival. In fact on

the evening of the first day there a group gathered outside their house and smashed all their front windows. This teenager's first job was working in a hairdressers very close to our church building. I am told that doing Caribbean hair can take all day, so while she had this "captive" audience she would tell them about Jesus and invite them to come along to the church. I do know that the second Caribbean person I baptized at GBC came via the hairdresser (the first, baptised a couple of weeks earlier, was the son in law of a church member).

Those attending GBC were not free from the racist attitudes that were around in our community. (This statement is deliberately ambiguous as some were on the receiving end of racism and others demonstrated racist attitudes.) From those days I vividly recall Caribbeans in the course of pastoral visits telling me of the hurt and pain they felt at the way they were being treated in the UK and within GBC. In essence they felt that their blackness was not welcome. So around 23 years ago I set up what was to be one of the most painful leaders' meetings I have ever attended. I asked two of the Caribbean men who were members of GBC to share with our all white leaders about how they felt as a part of GBC. They bared their souls, they talked about their pain not just as recipients of conscious racial prejudice on a daily basis from non-Christian people and structures around them but also in church. Their experiences included receiving "well meaning" but hurtful comments like "I don't see you as black, but just as my brother in Christ" (which they felt denied a part of their identity) to feeling ignored or excluded because of their culture. During the meeting some of the church leaders were in tears confessing their own racial prejudice most of it previously unconscious. For example one leader, who almost every Sunday invited some church people to her house for tea, realised that she had never invited a black person. Following this meeting the leadership intentionally set out to tackle racism, conscious and unconscious within the church family using Bible teaching, testimony and most effectively one to one encounters. Sometimes this involved painfully challenging people about their attitudes/actions. For example one week when one of our West African members was preaching he decided to sing a song part way through his sermon. One of our white church members stood up and walked out making clear his disgust. Later that week I visited the church member concerned and after listening to his views made it clear that West Africans were welcome at GBC and that I wanted them to bring their own culture with them. I gave the member two options, he could either continue to come and he would need sometimes to put up with things that he did not like or he could leave. He is still a part of GBC. As time went on I always continued to listen to our Caribbean, and later African and Asian members' feelings and experiences.

A key point in the process of the whole church community facing up to the reality of racism (which was still often denied by white members) and its consequent impact in the church came after an Asian family in membership of the church was attacked. The family's story is long and complex, but in essence after moving from one part of our area to another they suffered a series of racially motivated attacks that culminated in a very serious assault in the middle of the night which left three of the four family members in hospital with injuries that will scar them for the rest of their lives. The local authority and the local police had both failed to give the family any protection during this period even though the various attacks had become more serious. Our collective church outrage at the way this family was treated led to us holding a public meeting, in partnership with a local action group, with speakers including Neville Lawrence and Suhkdev Reel. This meeting resulted in significant media coverage and a sudden marked change in the attitude of the police towards the family, who eventually, with our strong encouragement, made a number of complaints to the Police Complaints Authority, most of which were upheld. This process galvanised our church family, exposing all of its members to the ugly realities of our racist society. Our actions were recognised by the local community,

resulting in us being asked to make a submission to the second phase of the Steven Lawrence enquiry.

In parallel with this process we set about intentionally working to see created a genuinely multi-ethnic church family. This process had a number of strands, developing multi-ethnic leadership and ministry, developing multi-ethnic worship and prayer, developing hermeneutics for a multi-ethnic context and the enjoyment of food and cultural experiences from a variety of ethnicities.

Developing genuinely culturally diverse leadership and ministry has been tough. I have invested a lot of time in leadership training and development (including public speaking). I developed a programme called the Leadership Training Group. This is an 18 month course that aims to work on character at the same time giving opportunity to experiment and develop in all sorts of areas of ministry with a view to all the members assuming some form of leadership role within the church at the end of the course. It has not been without its bitter disappointments but also it has succeeded in seeing people without any previous leadership experience or training go on to become key leaders within the church family at Greenford and elsewhere following relocation.

Developing worship that reflects different cultures been even harder, it was very difficult to persuade people who were not white British to join our all white British singers and musicians. A turning point here came after an international evening where some of our West Africans performed some songs from their churches back home, as a result of peoples' appreciation I managed to persuade several to join our singers' team. Sadly this was unsuccessful as the leaders had a very western view of what constituted worship, good vocal practice and good musical skill. Our African brothers and sisters found themselves feeling devalued and marginalized and we soon ended up once again with a virtually all white team. It was not until after the entire singers and musicians' leadership resigned from the church that we were able to again see people from our other cultures become involved. We have now made progress with some of our West Africans and Caribbeans regularly leading worship, increasingly using their own styles, but it has been a slow process. We now also routinely include songs from other cultures singing them in the language and style they were originally composed in. So, for example, when we sing a song in Hindi the singers will usually sit on the floor and we will use just a tabla style drum and bells for accompaniment with sometimes the addition of a sitar drone sound from a mobile phone app!

We are still early on in the journey for genuinely multi-ethnic prayer. This is not just about the use of a mixture of languages but also about the fact that prayer is done differently in different cultural contexts, and most people pray with a greater freedom and passion in their first language. So our prayer ministry team on Sundays are encouraged to use their first language even if the person they are praying for does not understand a work of it. When people are asked to lead public prayer they are given the option of using their first language. And I have noticed that now increasingly in small groups people will simply use their first language without any explanation or justification.

During an eight week Sabbatical visit to South Africa, where I was looking at the reality of racism and the process that some had gone through that led them to repent of racist attitudes and to accept that all human beings are equally made in the image of God, I came to realize that the way that I was teaching from the Bible at GBC was marginalizing many of those who had come from a non-European context. In essence my Bible teaching was Euro-centric. This led to me taking a part-time MA in Biblical Interpretation to help me develop some tools to better connect biblically with non-Europeans. In this process my epistemology was transformed as was my methodology for preaching. Sermons changed from being a monologue to being a genuine dialogue with the congregation giving space

for people to contribute from their own cultural heritage. It has become a normal experience for me that despite having thought deeply about the passage and having read half a dozen commentaries comments from the congregation would shed new light for me on the meaning of the text.

I am convinced that eating together food that reflects the diversity of our origins is very important. As also is sharing together in entertainment that originates in a variety of cultures. This can be poetry, art, music, dance, storytelling. We regularly have events that draw on the richness of the cultures we have with a wonderful array of food and/or entertainment.

Greenford Baptist is still on a journey, it is still changing so that it can effectively engage with the community that we are a part of. Let's be in faith for the next fifty years.



Greenford Baptist Church