

RACIAL JUSTICE: A TASK FOR ALL

Introduction

This article offers a personal reflection on racial justice in British Methodism. For rigorous academic research on this important theme in the Methodist Church, I refer you to scholars such as Prof Anthony Reddie. The purpose of this article is not to give a comprehensive history of racial justice work but to outline the path to the establishment of Racial Justice Sunday in the Methodist Church.

Racial Justice Sunday was first marked in the Methodist Church in September 1995. However, in contemporary Methodism, the origins of Racial Justice Sunday lie deeper in history. Going back to the “uniting Conference” of 1932, the Methodist Church engaged with matters of social justice through its Department of Christian Citizenship, and then through succeeding agencies such as the Division of Social Responsibility. In the Methodist DNA social justice and social holiness are inter-related.

At the core of the work of the Department of Citizenship was the plight of Jewish Refugees, even before war broke out. By 1939, 40,000 refugees had left Germany and Austria. Some 75,000 adult refugees and children and young people were left stranded in Britain. The Citizenship Department, through its Secretary, the Rev Henry Carter, asked Methodists for financial support for work with refugees.

After World War Two, during which countless numbers of loyal “Subjects” from British Colonies died in the cause of the “Allies”, many people termed “coloured” started to arrive in the UK. Many of those who came here from the Caribbean and India came at the invitation of British agencies to “help build motherland”. There was for example, Sybil Phoenix (nee Marshall), who later told the story of listening to Enoch Powell MP in British Guyana when he spoke appealingly about working in Britain. I arrived in the UK in September 1964 aged eleven with my Indian parents, from the newly independent Kenya, with the status of “British Subject” (Bhagal, 2000; 2021).

Black Methodists: A Tree God Planted

Black Methodists, particularly from the Caribbean Islands, were beginning to worship in congregations in Notting Hill, Brixton, Birmingham and Leeds. Though they were not always readily welcomed, many inner-city congregations would have been depleted and even closed without their membership, gifts and contributions. These were the days many mainline congregations told black Christians “your church is down the road” pointing, for example, to the New Testament Church of God (Brooks, 1982). Nonetheless, in 1985 around 16,000 black people were worshipping in Methodist Churches, and were contributing as Sunday School Teachers, Council members, Local Preachers, and Church Stewards, though many were reluctant to take up leadership roles for various reasons, not least suffering from the racism of white people (Walton, 1985).

In 1977 a youth club run by Sybil Phoenix was burned down by the National Front. Sybil stood on the ground later and declared, “my name is Phoenix, and with the help of God I will build a new centre from the ashes”. In 1978 the Methodist Conference held in Bradford, adopted a report influenced by Sybil Phoenix which declared racism a “sin”, and “a direct contradiction of the Gospel of Jesus” (Methodist Church Statements on Social Responsibility, 1995). The 1978 Statement on racism was followed by the pioneering development from 1981 of Racism Awareness Training, founded and led by Sybil Phoenix and the Rev Vic Watson, and delivered through the Methodist and Ecumenical Leadership Racism Awareness Workshops (MELRAW). The 1978 Statement had appealed for Methodists to participate in “constructive programmes for racial justice and the building of compassion and goodwill”, but did not say what it meant by “racism” or “racial justice” or outline any comprehensive plans for action. The focus of MELRAW was specifically to address and challenge the prevalence of racism in churches. The training was delivered ecumenically.

The 1980s saw the establishment of the Methodist Community and Race Relations Committee (CRRC) which came under the governance of the newly created Division of Social Responsibility. The early 80s saw rising anger in black people particularly at racism in policing, criminal justice, education, housing and immigration (Hiro, 1991; Parekh Report, 2000)). The anger at this injustice, like a “voice crying in the

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wilderness”, was expressed in the street uprisings that came to be termed “riots”, for example in Brixton, Handsworth, Wolverhampton, Tottenham, and Toxteth.

In July 1981 I stood with black and white young people who were literally fighting with Police in Handsworth with bricks and sticks. I spent three days and nights (with a colleague) around Lozells Road, Handsworth. I sensed a deep and seething anger in the young people at Police racism and violence.

I attended the Methodist Conference as a local delegate for the first time in 1983, made a number of speeches on matters related to civil disobedience (which led to a major report on challenging injustice), and interfaith relations (which helped to establish the Methodist Committee for Interfaith Relations with me as a joint Secretary).

Following this Conference, I served on most Methodist Committees including the CRRC which I joined from September 1983. The Committee supported the appointment of a Methodist Secretary for Race and Community. In 1984 Mr Ivan Weekes took up this role, and worked with and serviced the CRRC for the following ten years.

Ivan Weekes developed and promoted racial justice work with unrelenting passion and professionalism. He worked closely with Black Methodist leaders to develop constructive ways forward. He became an inspiration, mentor and role model for many, and promoted black leadership. Ivan was succeeded in his role by Naboth Muchopa, Jennifer Crook, and then in 2018, Bevan Powell, each of them bringing their own passion, professionalism, experience and wisdom to the task.

The Community and Race Relations Committee became the Racial Justice Committee (CRJ) in 1995. In 2014, subsequent to the Equality Act 2010, working with all nine protected areas in matters of justice, the CRJ became the Committee for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). The EDI Committee came to an end in 2021 with a Methodist Conference strategy towards what was termed the Implementation of the Inclusive Church addressing injustices and inequalities directed at all the characteristics protected in the Equality Act 2010. The Methodist Conference 2021 adopted this strategy under the title of Justice, Dignity and Solidarity. The changes in the name of the Committees and work focussing on racial justice reflect the developing and broadening agenda.

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The first meeting of Black Methodist Ministers took place on 29 May 1985. The meeting was supported by Ivan, and was held in his office in Westminster Central Hall. The attendees were: Hewie Andrew, Inderjit Bhogal, Kingsley Halden, Herbert McGhie, Charles Watson, and Robinson Milwood. In attendance also were Ivan, and a Student Minister, Wesley Daniel. The agenda of the meeting read: Black Leadership Experience; Stationing of Black Ministers; Black & Asian Contribution to British Methodism; Education of Superintendents and Chairmen; Recommendation to the Authorities. We were few, and we met as people engaged in ministry, under enormous pressures, in danger of exhaustion and burnout.

We committed ourselves to meet regularly for mutual encouragement and education in order to play an effective role in the life of the Methodist Church. And with this the Black Methodist Ministers Group was founded. Ten years later on 28 May 1995, at an anniversary service held in Wesley's Chapel, London, one of the last actions of Ivan Weekes in his role was to lead us into being a Black Methodists Group, embracing lay and ordained black leaders. This Group has also continued to evolve becoming the Belonging Together Ministers Group (2009) aimed at helping the Methodist Church to fulfil mission and ministry through its diverse membership.

The Community and Race Relations Committee, with its Ethnic Minorities in Britain Working Group, within the Division of Social Responsibility, was the think tank which initiated racial justice work in the 1980s. It commissioned the research on the experiences of Black Methodists that resulted in the publication of A Tree God Planted (Walton, 1985), with a set of recommendations. This report informed our thinking and work.

Two years on from this the Methodist Conference (1987) adopted a seminal report, Faithful and Equal, and adopted a programme for tackling racism and action for racial justice including: all ordinands undertaking racism awareness training; encouraging all Black Methodists to offer themselves for all the ministries of the church; every church council to considering what action it has taken or will take to combat racism.

The 1990s saw the development of access courses encouraging more Black Methodists to offer and train for leadership, lay and ordained. Wesley Daniel and I got the Methodist Conference to ensure that Black Theology was on the curricula of

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theological colleges. We wanted students to go beyond racism awareness training in preparation for ordination and ministry. We encouraged and promoted black leadership. Within racism awareness training, we highlighted the need to address whiteness and power issues.

Sybil Phoenix used to say “racism is prejudice plus power”, and these words are incorporated in the report Faithful and Equal (1987). Sybil insisted that while we all have our prejudices, the difference between black people and white people is that invariably power is in the hands of white people. This is how the world is structured. White people had to address this colour inequality as integral to addressing racism.

What was becoming clear was that tackling racism required more than awareness workshops offered by individuals. Greater stress was being placed on the need to engage the whole church in the work. The task of racial justice could not be left to individuals and groups. Racial justice is a task for all members, and had to be embedded in worship and prayer. Racial Justice Sunday was adopted by the Methodist Conference, and agreed to be held on the second Sunday of September each year from September 1995.

The Committee for Racial Justice began to concentrate on the task facing the whole Church, in all settings, and to work with ecumenical partners. We found strength in ecumenical partners through the British Council of Churches Community and Race Relations Unit (CRRU), which later became the Churches Commission for Racial Justice and brought Racial Justice Sunday to all denominations. Considerable strength in the struggle for racial justice came internationally from the World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism. The Kairos Document (1985) from South Africa with its critique of State and Church Theology, challenged us with its call for prophetic theology and action.

A pivotal event that shook and shaped our being and work was the brutal murder by a group of young white people of Stephen Lawrence, aged 18, on 22 April 1993, in a street near his home in London. Stephen’s mother and father, Doreen and Neville, committed themselves to a struggle for truth, justice and change centred on Stephen. Their persistence led to the Public Inquiry into Stephen Lawrence’s Murder, led by Sir William McPherson in 1998. The McPherson Inquiry made 70 recommendations for change, including changes in policing and education, and acknowledging “institutional racism” in policing.

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The McPherson Inquiry Report did not underline the endemic and deep-set racism that results in murder, but Doreen Lawrence has been relentless in her pursuit of justice and change in tackling racism. She addressed the Methodist Conference 2000 saying again, “the time of justice and change has come”.

In my mind a key task ahead was the development of black leadership and black theology. In 1993, with support from the Black Methodist Ministers Group, I organised the first International Black Theology Conference to be held in the UK, and hosted it in Carver Street Wesley Methodist Church where I was Minister with pastoral charge. The need to work internationally was clearly important. Participants including Anthony Reddie, Robert Beckford, Jacquelyn Grant, Randall Bailey and Itumeleng Mosala came from UK, USA, and South Africa.

We laid the foundations for the development of British Black Theology, which has been led subsequently with distinction by Methodist layman and Local Preacher Prof Anthony Reddie, now an established academic and writer based in Oxford. Anthony has written around one hundred scholarly essays, articles and books. His sustained, scholarly, ground breaking research and writing has been an outstanding contribution to the challenges of achieving racial justice.

Anthony has diligently worked with the training of preachers and pastors, lay and ordained, in the areas of race, class and diversity. His training style is that of participative education, including action, reflection, art and drama. In his latest work he has written an incisive analysis and critique of the development of racial justice training in the Methodist Church over the last thirty years (2020). He critiques racism awareness training and points towards addressing the deconstruction of the norm of whiteness. Anthony’s work cannot be ignored by anyone exploring racism awareness, racial justice and whiteness.

Youth Leadership

The first Methodist Connexional Conference of Young Black Methodists was held 2-4 November 1990, to encourage and develop the leadership skills of young Black and Asian Methodists, supporting them to positively contribute to the life of the Church. In 1998 the Racial Justice Office established the Black Methodist Youth Conference. In 2005 this became the Association of Black Methodist Youth, and later merged

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with the Methodist Youth Conference. Up to the year 2021 four young Black and Asian Methodist leaders have held the role of Methodist Youth President, Tamara Wray (2014), Jasmine Yeboah (2018), Thelma Commey (2019) and Daud Irfan (2021).

Asian Leadership and Theology

Within all this work, attempts were also made over the last few years by myself, Israel Selvanayagam and Mukti Barton to gather Asian Theologians in Britain. This has been important alongside the progress of Black Theology in Britain which has grown after the first International Conference on Black Theology.

The first International Conference on Asian Theology in Britain was held in April 2018, marking twenty-five years since the 1993 Black Theology Conference. The focus was on the contributions of Asian Women Theologians [of Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lanka, and Bangladeshi backgrounds]. The Conference was organised under the general heading of Ek Aurat [One Woman], affirming the contribution and togetherness of Asian women theologians.

Racial Justice Sunday

The developments I have outlined above reflect the search and struggle for racial justice, and the attempts to ensure that this took root in the life of the church. Racial Justice Sunday is part of this strategy. There is a real desire to embed our commitment to work for racial justice in worship and prayer. The idea of having a Racial Justice Sunday is to ensure an annual reminder at least, and a marker for a regular ongoing commitment. Racial Justice Sunday is a challenge to reflect theologically, in the light of Scripture, to hold up the call of God to inclusion of all.

The idea of Racial Justice Sunday was to challenge and encourage every congregation to make racial justice part of their life, to grow in their awareness of what the issues are, but also to have available for them resources prepared on the whole theme of racial justice for worship and for prayer, with suggestions for sermons, written prayers, possible hymns, and ideas for action. The national ecumenical instrument, now Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), took

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on the responsibility for Racial Justice Sunday, and to provide an annual resource pack.

Racial Justice Sunday is an important initiative. There are other constructive ways to work and pray for and build racial justice. The response to racial justice, in predominantly white areas has frequently been that “racism is not a problem here”. This view suggests that racism only exists where black people are present. The Black Lives Matter movement challenges us to move beyond this, and beyond racism awareness, to addressing questions around colonialism, Empire, slavery, being white, white power, and white privilege, as integral to eliminating racism.

One of the key ideas upheld in a Racial Justice Sunday Resource Pack is that there is one race, the human race, and we are all children of God. We are all made in the Image of God, whatever our ethnicity, whatever the shade of the colour of our skin, with all our immense diversity, we are One in Christ. Made in the Image of God, we are all members of the Body of Christ. We all belong equally together. These two themes of Image of God, and Body of Christ, permit no discrimination on any basis. Colour and ethnicity-based discrimination is an obstacle to our highest ideals, an assault on the Image of God, mars our relationship with God, and destroys our relationships with each other. As followers of Christ, we commit ourselves to uphold the dignity of all human beings and to put this into practice in our daily worship and witness. This is a central theological theme that guides us.

Anthony Reddie, in an article published in the Journal Religions (2020) offers an incisive and insightful analysis and reflection on racial justice work, highlighting a journey “from racism awareness to deconstructing whiteness” in the quest for racial justice. Previously he wrote of the need to move beyond “apologetic rhetoric” by which Churches can resist progress towards the achievement of justice. He argues that redefining “the norm” is necessary in the Methodist Church if we are to move beyond rhetoric of apology towards a more determined and intentioned mode of challenging injustice, be it on the grounds of race, gender, sexuality or disability, and build equity and full inclusion (Reddie, 2003).

Strategy: Success and Struggle

There have been many countless numbers of presentations, sermons, interventions, speeches, reflections on racial justice, in addition to actions taken for racial justice.

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The publications of Black and Asian Methodists speak volumes. Considerable energy has gone into worship, prayer and work for racial justice. But what have we achieved? We may have helped to influence and change some thought and practice in individuals, and in structures. There has been some progress in terms of the promotion and development of black leadership and black theology. This can be seen in the greater numbers of the engagement and employment of black people in Churches. Black Methodists have occupied the most senior lay and ordained roles. Black Theology publications have grown.

In 1984 The Methodist Conference meeting in Wolverhampton designated Mr Leon Murray to be appointed Vice-President of Conference when it met in Birmingham in 1985. Ivan Weekes went on to be Vice-President of Conference in 1991. Following him, Dr Daleep Mukarji (2013) and Mr Bala Gnanapragasam (2018) were also appointed to the position of Vice-President. I was appointed President of Conference 2000. Sonia Hicks was elected President of Conference 2021. In 2021, Anthony Boateng was elected Vice President designate for the Methodist Conference 2022. Novette Headley was designated Chair of Birmingham District from 2022. Many black Methodists occupy roles of Superintendent Presbyters, and Circuit Stewards. I want to see more black Methodists in roles such as District Chair, and in senior Connexional roles.

There remain obstacles to the flourishing of black leaders. Holding roles in leadership as black people is a tough place and requires additional spiritual, emotional and physical stamina, and includes constant struggle. Holding high office does not remove the feeling of being on the margins, and can bring with it malignment from opponents. I have often found myself saying, “let us not grow weary in doing what is right...let us work for the good of all” (Galatians 6:9,10).

Our attention remains fixed on addressing racism. In a theology that insists we are all made in the Image of God, and genetics that affirms we are one human race, what is racism? Why does discrimination based on skin colour persist in people who value all the beautiful colours of God? How can we strengthen our resolve to work with people of all faiths and professions to promote racial justice?

The work of racial justice remains an unfinished task that must go on without ceasing. Racial Justice is a cry and call of God that calls for responses at the heart of worship and prayer, theology and preaching. Racial justice is a collaborative,

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congregational, “connexional” task involving us all. There are challenges in the spheres of personal, structural and theological work. There remain obstacles of injustice and exclusion in the way. There is much more to do. We can do better. We can be more. We can learn from and build on our history. We owe this to each other. And God beckons us on.

God calls us to build a justice-based Church, where justice is served with mercy and humility, a church where all of us with all our immense diversity are honoured members in the one Body of Christ, where all are equally included at the table with no superiors or inferiors, no centres or margins, no one is neglected or excluded, with one goal always, to “seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33). Everything follows from here. The pilgrimage towards our goal is stronger if we work with ecumenical, and international partners, embrace each other, respect each other, give life to each other (Bhokal, 2000).

Holy Communion is not only a “foretaste of the heavenly banquet”, it is also a revelation of the church and world as it is meant to be. In a world of the violence of inequalities, war, bigotry, environmental degradation and climate change, the Church can reflect a model of one body symbolised in the one bread we share (Cruz, 2014), a sanctuary for all (Bhokal, 2021). We can stand in solidarity with each other in our suffering humanity, not in charity but with justice, mercy and humility, seeking the safety and fulfilment of all.

Rev’d Dr. Inderjit Bhokal is a former President of Conference who has recently been awarded the Methodist World Peace Prize.

Inderjit has been a tireless supporter of refugees and has worked to foster interfaith relations and multicultural communities. One of the peace-related movements initiated by him was [City of Sanctuary](#), a grassroots, movement to build cultures of welcome, hospitality and safety.

“My whole life has been inspired by people around the world who have held up the witness to peacemaking, challenging war, violence and killing”, he wrote after learning about the peace award, “the most challenging issue facing human beings is how to live with those who are different from you.”

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