

GOD'S HEART FOR UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Titilola Ossai

THE EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE'S ONE PEOPLE COMMISSION COORDINATOR, TITILOLA OSSAI, EXPLORES AND SHARES GOD'S HEART FOR UNITY IN DIVERSITY AMONGST OUR CHURCHES.

UNITY OF GOD'S PEOPLE THROUGH DIVERSITY

We see God's heart for unity, the coming together of his people, throughout scripture. In Genesis God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness". So, God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:26-27).

In John's Gospel, we find Jesus interacting with a Samaritan woman by the well, going against gender as well as cultural barriers (John 4:4-26). In Revelation, John prophesied: '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 before the Lamb' (Revelation 7:9).

Often it seems, particularly in these times, that the world, and occasionally the church too, couldn't be further from God's vision of unity. This year we've seen old wounds of ethnic tension resurface in the US, the UK and different

parts of Europe. And these challenges are not peculiar to the west; the Global South has had its fair share of ethnic conflict and violence too. Then, when we look at some of our local churches, while of course we don't see this type of hostility, neither do we see the level of diversity and integration which should be expected of the people of God.

But this is just one side of the coin. With many of our communities becoming increasingly multicultural, we are witnessing a significant rise in inter-racial marriages and relationships. According to the 2011 census, the number of dual heritage children up to four years old rose from 116,000 in 2001 to 220,000 in 2011. Does this indicate that while division and disunity haven't been eradicated, we are also seeing signs of a people united first and foremost by love? Surely our churches are to be ready and equipped for this changing landscape.

As the epicentre of most communities, the church has the responsibility to emulate kingdom-like behaviour by bringing together communities that would otherwise be divided by racial, social and sexual distinctions. The church should serve as an exemplary blueprint of what community looks like when people come together and embrace their differences as they work towards a common goal. The church should be the solution to the challenges we have in our communities and the model of the progress we long to see.

For we, the church, where 'there is neither Greek nor Jew, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28), are called and empowered by God to embrace and celebrate one another in love despite our peculiarities, and in so doing we reflect the love of God in this fallen world.

As it has been put by the Revd Yemi Adedeji, Director of the Evangelical Alliance's One People Commission, and Steve Clifford, former General Director of the Evangelical Alliance, 'When God's people from diverse ethnic backgrounds focus on him and express themselves in worship, it demonstrates the unity we will experience when we come before God's throne as that "great multitude...from every nation, tribe, people and language"' ('The [Im]possible Dream' 2019, page 105).

You see, though we are in this world, we are not of this world and we operate kingdom principles. The church of Christ is empowered to walk in the fruit of the Spirit, awoken from slumber, stand strong, and put on the whole armour of Christ to live up to God's heartbeat - unity. 'Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world' (1 John 4:4).

TIME TO GO THE EXTRA MILE

At the beginning of 2021, what spiritual and practical steps can we, God's representatives, take to reflect better our Father's heart for unity?



Prioritising diversity is not about tokenism or merely for an affirmative action, but realising that it is the heartbeat of God to have the Church 'as one'.



1. THINK LIKE GOD

We are to align our hearts and minds to God's Word. We are admonished to renew our minds (Romans 12:2) and align our hearts with God's, which is for all people. 'Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 2:5).

2. LISTEN TO GOD

Our diverse society requires that church leaders spend time praying together, regularly leading the congregation through prayer meetings, small prayer hubs, etc to ensure that they stay connected to God. We can get a 'now' direction from the Holy Spirit, who knows the heart of the Father and teaches us all things. Do not be in doubt that you would not hear him when he speaks to you. 'My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me' (John 10:27).

3. THINK SMALL AS WELL AS BIG

Diversity is not only about bringing different perspectives to the table. It is in the very small and little things that we do, for example, the food we eat, the

places we go. People should be made to feel welcome and included. These things just don't happen, they are made to happen.

4. CHECK WHO IS IN YOUR TEAM

It should be a priority for leadership in churches' pastoral teams to ensure that their teams are diverse. Diversity brings about informational cohesion and enhances creativity and unfettered innovation. When church leaders embrace diversity, they dare to come out of differences and lay more emphasis on commonalities, getting into how God views us and what he says. 'Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all' (Colossians 3:11).

5. ESTABLISH YOUR MISSION

It is key that the leadership has a heavenly vision - a united vision precedes a united mission. Being strategic and aiming to build churches that reflect heaven on earth should be the focus. If your church is not diverse, consider exploring other modes of outreach, such as where and how you evangelise, the resources that can be used, and the message.

6. DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN

Creating a short and long-term action plan for implementation through strategies by the leadership team, church workers, trustees, advisory groups, etc (Habakkuk 2:2). Prioritising diversity is not about tokenism or merely for an affirmative action, but realising that it is the heartbeat of God to have the church 'as one'.

7. UTILISE RESOURCES

With churches going virtual and faced with the challenges on the coronavirus restrictions that keep evolving, it's no longer business as usual. This has brought about new opportunities to reach a wider audience - one of the positive things in terms of outreach that has come from a difficult year. Regularly check in with your tech/social media team to ensure that all relevant modes of communication are being utilised in order to engage current members and reach new ones.

To find out some more information on the Evangelical Alliance's changing church guide during and after the lockdown, please visit eauk.org/changing-church/gathering-church

BRINGING GOD'S PEOPLE TOGETHER

We are living in the times when Christians are encouraged to be the voice of God on earth, live by the example set by the word of God, and spread Christ's love to the world graciously. We should be relentless in giving, for freely we have received and freely we should give.

The One People Commission (OPC), a key part of the Evangelical Alliance, was born out of a response to God's Word and a move of his Spirit towards unity and mission. It is committed to supporting churches and Christian organisations as they seek to promote in all its vibrancy whilst celebrating diversity across the evangelical churches in the UK.

As the Revd Adedeji put it, 'Embracing diversity is like inviting people to the party, inclusion is inviting them to dance,



but integration means we host the party together.' (Steve Clifford and Yemi Adedeji, 'The [Im]possible Dream' 2019, page 39).

My prayer is that, as we unite as the church in the UK, we will see more and more people come to find faith in Jesus Christ, having their lives transformed by relationship with him. It is hoped that churches would engage and demonstrate to the world how the impossible dream of uniting as one through ethnic integration can become a possible dream irrespective of race, culture or background, as Christians learn to love each other, bringing glory to God in heaven and here on earth.

As Jesus prayed: 'My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,

that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one - I in them and you in me - so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me' (John 17:20-23).

We are blessed to have a relational heavenly Father who cares about us and our world.

Titilola Ossai is currently the Evangelical Alliance's One People Commission Co-ordinator. Coming from a legal background, she was involved actively in championing and supporting the

emergence of new communities in Ireland, lobbying and dialoguing issues on race, equality, diversity and inclusion across border counties and national European Union funded initiatives.



SPEAK O LORD

Keith Getty & Stuart Townend

Speak, O Lord, as we come to you to receive the food of your holy word. Take your truth, plant it deep in us; shape and fashion us in your likeness, That the light of Christ might be seen today in our acts of love and our deeds of faith.

Speak, O Lord, and fulfil in us all your purposes, for your glory.

Teach us, Lord, full obedience, holy reverence, true humility. Test our thoughts and our attitudes in the radiance of your purity. Cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes to see your majestic love and authority. Words of power that can never fail; let their truth prevail over unbelief.

Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds; help us grasp the heights of your plans for us. Truths unchanged from the dawn of time that will echo down through eternity. And by grace we'll stand on your promises, and by faith we'll walk as you walk with us. Speak, O Lord, till your Church is built and the earth is filled with your glory.