

# **The Daffodil, the Rose and the Hibiscus: Exploring Diversity in Ministry Across Cultures**

**Rev Ermal Kirby**

## **Background**

When, in 1980, I became a Minister in Full Connexion with The Methodist Church, it was still commonly held that anyone could walk into a Methodist Chapel on a Sunday morning and, regardless of where one was, there would be a fairly standard fare on offer: such fare being, the regulation Hymn sandwich, a multi-layered concoction, with thick slices of wholemeal hymns (Charles Wesley was especially favoured) and at the centre, a sermon that sprang from the warmed heart, and/or the theologically informed reflections of the Preacher.

Culture, it was said, is 'the way we do things around here' and in those days Methodists knew just how things should be done in Halifax or Hackney, in Looe or in Lewisham.

By contrast, a Senior Methodist Leader told the story some years later, of his preaching in one of the historic, and almost iconic, places of worship of Methodism, the place to which [Donald Soper](#) was connected in his later years. On this occasion, in the congregation were members drawn from the two churches of the Circuit, Hinde Street and King's Cross, and it had been agreed that, in recognition of the linguistic needs of the congregation, the sermon would be translated from English into both Mandarin and Cantonese.

All was going well until, half way through the sermon, the Preacher had to pause to allow the two translators to debate with each other the most appropriate way of translating a particular theological idea that he had introduced. 'The way we do things around here' was changing.

The composition and the complexion of the Methodist Church in Britain has changed significantly over the past 50-60 years, and we are now at the stage where, at another of our historic places, Wesley's Chapel, the members are from 55 different national backgrounds; it is estimated that across the London District 66% of members have their place of family origin in countries beyond the UK; as I looked through the directory of ministers in the 'active work' in the London District, from *personal* knowledge, I could categorize 46 of them, 32%, as either themselves having been born outside the UK, or having parents originating from beyond the UK.

When I was working in South Africa from the beginning of 2012 to the end of 2015, I became increasingly aware of the ways in which cultural and ethnic differences were having an impact on the development of the Church there in the post-Apartheid era. I believed that although the context in South Africa was very different from that of the London District I had left, there were similar questions being asked - or often, NOT being asked - about the significance for ministers and for churches of the increasing incidence of cross-cultural ministry.

So, when I returned to the UK at the beginning of 2016, it was with a real sense of anticipation that I accepted a half-time appointment at the Susanna Wesley Foundation, and took responsibility for a [Project](#) that they had been planning that would,

- *identify how factors such as cultural background and attitudes to diversity influence relationships in Circuits, and the way in which ministry is offered and received; and*
- *explore ways in which the findings could be applied to the policies and practices of the Methodist Church and other interested ecumenical partners.*

The approach chosen was to engage in Qualitative Research; that is, rather than sending out a questionnaire to as many people as we could cope with, and analysing and tabulating the responses that came back, we would seek to interview in greater depth, 20 ministers who self-identified as being engaged in cross-cultural ministry, asking them about their experiences, their expectations and their views about ways in which such ministry could be developed.

## **Findings**

There are many different ways in which one could present the things that emerged from the Interviews: for our purposes today, I have chosen three headings, to give a flavour of what I see as the richness and potential of this area of exploration.

### **A. Identity**

I suspect that most of us don't spend a lot of time thinking about our Identity; we very readily fall into the civilian equivalent of Name, Rank, and Number, as an easy way of describing ourselves, or giving a potted version of our Identity. But from the very first interview I began to see that people engaged in cross-cultural ministry have a sense of identity that is much more nuanced and often multi-layered.

Here are some examples:

"If I were to express my identity in terms of symbols, I would choose the **daffodil** - because I am fiercely Welsh; the **rose**, to reflect the thorough Britishness that I share with my wife; and the **hibiscus**, the national flower of Haiti, because I owe more than I can ever say to that country and its people."

"I'm first generation Black British, with one foot in the Caribbean."

"A Yorkshire woman with Welsh roots and extended experience of living in America."

"English; white; middle class."

"My father was Irish and my mother was from Lancashire; I've always had a sense of being odd."

"[In a word] Complicated."

“A white African.”

“In terms of region, I identify with Yorkshire; but by choice I became a Botswana National; and in London I’m learning what it means to have a trans-borough identity.”

“Currently British, with African (Krio) origin.”

“Ghanaian; of the Ashanti tribe.”

“...from a blended family.”

These are such rich and evocative ways of expressing who we are, but so often we trim down to the bare stalk, and leave aside the colour of the flowers.

The responses made me wonder how we might discover one another in the richness of the diversity that God has created, and allow ourselves to be enriched by one another.

We might also answer the searching question of one research participant, “Where do I belong?”

## **B. Ministry**

We asked, ‘What, for you, is the heart of circuit ministry?’ And some of the responses were:

“Pastoral Engagement; creating a community of trust”;

“It’s working with people who are on a journey to help them find who they are becoming in God”;

“Preaching and leading worship”;

“Reaching the people on the back row”;

“Getting to know people sufficiently to be trusted with people’s stories”;

“Priesthood - God’s story and peoples’ story brought together”;

“Servant leadership”;

“Following the example of Jesus in putting the poor first”;

“Working together for something bigger... reaching for something new”.

The next question was, ‘How does your cultural identity affect the way in which you exercise your ministry?’

There were many accounts of experiences of challenge and conflict – some so terrible, I felt angry and ashamed that such things could happen in the Methodist Church:

“One member made it clear that he would never receive the elements of Holy Communion from my black hands”;

“They did not allow me to be their pastor”;

“The appointment to which I was sent was one which other ministers had declined ... I [a black minister] lived on an estate where support for the N[ational] F[ront] was rife”;

“I had to develop a thick skin, though I did not want to”;

“They described the time of praise that I introduced as ‘mumbo, jumbo’”;

However, there were also accounts of generosity and grace, that brought real delight and hope;

“A woman who had walked more than ten miles to attend a service that I was leading, arrived after the service had ended. Kneeling before me, she asked for a blessing from me, which I gave with utmost fervour. Then I knelt before her and asked her to bless me, and she did so with grace and tears”.

“I believe God sent you here for a purpose”;

There were in many instances critical ‘turning points’, that changed relationships for better or worse;

“When I visited [the member who had refused to receive Communion from me] in hospital and asked him if I could offer him Communion, with tears he replied, ‘Yes, please’”.

“Something changed when I invited the [more than 20] leaders to my home for a meal”;

“I saw that in the challenges we were facing, the aim for the whole community should be, not just coping, but being ‘*more than conquerors*’”;

“I showed my commitment to the whole community and [even] the NF households recognised what I was doing and came to accept me”;

“I challenged the behaviour of two men who were literally shouting at each other in the meeting...”

One person reflected, “It was a way of God shaping me;”

A minister who, while white, is not of British origin, observed wryly that in serving culturally diverse congregations, “It helps that I, too, am a ‘foreigner’”; another stated,

“They saw the church as a social club and what I was offering was beyond their experience”;

And one of the most poignant comments was, “I’ve reached the point of saying, I can’t change any more; can’t you meet me part-way?”

Among the Lay Leaders who took part in a focus group, one of the key challenges was seen to be in relation to communication, with inflection, pronunciation, and usage all causing difficulty.

### **C. Development**

Some of the concerns of Research Participants were in relation to the Induction that was provided for people who were about to begin cross-cultural ministry, and the support that is offered while they are engaged in it.

It is heartening to learn from Senior Officers in the Church, and from ministers who have begun cross-cultural ministry more recently, that there is now a much more thorough induction programme, and a more intentional process for offering continuing support.

However, there seemed to be no over-arching agreement about the aim(s) and outcomes of cross-cultural ministry.

Some saw it as a means of 'filling the gaps in the Stations'; for others, it was an opportunity to engage in Mission to the Methodist Church in Britain, calling them back to traditional standpoints and practices in relation to spiritual devotion and personal relationships.

For some it was a way of supporting people from different cultural backgrounds and preserving the distinctive features of the different expressions of Methodist identity, and different ways of affirming that identity were mentioned –

- setting aside some time during the main Sunday Service for singing songs that reflected the cultures of origin of the congregation;
- having a 'walk-up/dance-up' collection;
- Circuit Festivals and Celebrations linked to Black History Month and other occasions;
- Intentionally increasing the representativeness and diversity of leaders; some believed that it was a necessary and welcome way of expressing the gift of diversity that is at the heart of all creation.

As the Research Participants had expressed a variety of views about the vision that undergirded cross-cultural ministry, it was decided that these should be explored further with Circuit Stewards.

Stewards mentioned that the ideals and motivations of Circuits seemed to be almost irrelevant in face of the realities of the Stationing Matching process: it was often the case that the Minister with whom they were matched had not been on the list of the ministers the Circuit identified as having the appropriate gifts and experience.

There was general support for the view put forward initially by one Circuit that, more important than the ethnic or cultural background of the Minister, was the willingness of the Minister to engage wholeheartedly with the diversity of the church or Circuit and to journey with them.

One of the tools used in the meeting with Circuit Stewards was a worksheet that was originally developed by the Zebra Project in East London, but which had been subsequently revised and adapted.

It proved very useful in helping the group to assess their attitudes and expectations, but it also showed that more help was needed in spelling out how the ministry of the Church of the future might differ from that of the Church today.

As I looked again at the different ways of engaging with difference that were being seen in the Church, I found a conviction growing within me, that in this situation of increasing diversity, when engaging in cross-cultural ministry, the Church was uniquely placed to get away from the inherited practices of seeking to bring about either Conformity or Conversion, or of aiming merely for Co-existence in place of Competition and Conflict. Instead we could seek to discover what it would mean to be Co-creators, working with those we regard as 'different' and bringing something new to birth.

Perhaps we do not have to choose between the daffodil, the rose and the hibiscus; nor, heaven forbid, should we put them through a mangle to create a flower stew; nor do we have to just leave them in a vase and enjoy their beauty.

Rather, it could be that we are being called to be co-creators, with God and with one another, taking some of the strain from one plant and adding it to that of another – without diminishing or destroying the uniqueness and the virtues of the originals.

As the Project progresses, I am becoming more and more convinced that it will not be sufficient to treat this as a traditional research project with a judiciously argued report being presented at the end. If it is to be of real value, the research needs to be part of a process of engagement that will draw in people beyond the Research Participants, the academic community and a selected number of Church leaders.

As one Senior Leader commented, "I don't think that we understand what it means to be a Global Church."

The way in which we deal with difference has leapt to the top of the Agenda in national and international relations. When we set the date for this Symposium back in December 2016, I could not have imagined the events that were to take place on London Bridge and Borough Market, nor those in Manchester arena, or on Westminster Bridge.

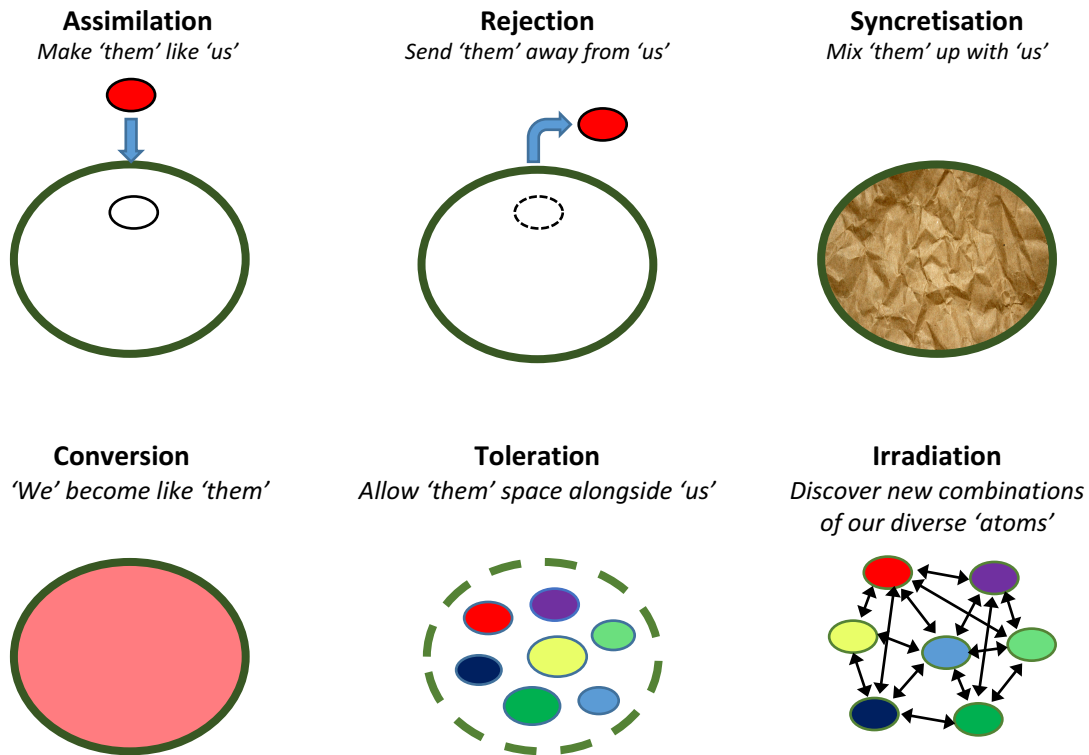
A new approach is needed if we are to find more fruitful ways of dealing with difference at all levels, and in all spheres of society. What, I wonder, are the lessons we should be learning from our experience of ministry across cultures and could it be that those lessons apply, not just to the shaping of our Church Governance and practice, but could also be a way forward in the wider context?

In analysing the findings of the research, I have found myself returning to some models of engaging with diversity that I became familiar with when working in community development. It was suggested then that there are five characteristic responses that we tend to make when we encounter differences:

- Assimilation: we seek to assimilate the difference (to make 'them' like 'us');
- Rejection: we reject the difference (send 'them' away from 'us');
- Syncretism: we syncretise the difference (mix 'them' up with 'us');

- Conversion: we surrender to the difference ('we' become like 'them');
- Toleration: we tolerate the difference (allow 'them' space alongside 'us').

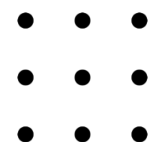
I developed the following diagrams to illustrate these ideas: the goal is to explore what mutual 'irradiation' might mean.



It seemed almost providential that it was at the very time that I was seeking to develop these ideas, there was a Colloquium at the Susanna Wesley Foundation, in which one participant made a brief reference to the work of Otto Scharmer, and his 2007 book, *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges*. Scharmer's plea for wider involvement of partners in a process of Co-initiating, Co-sensing, Presencing, Co-creating, and Co-evolving, seemed to me most apt.

I see it as an application of a principle I first discovered in a book co-authored by Benjamin Zander, Conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, and his wife Rosamund Stone Zander, *The Art of Possibility*.

He sets his readers a puzzle consisting of nine dots arranged in a square as shown, and invites them to join all nine dots with four straight lines, without taking the pen from the paper. Zander comments, "If you have never played the game before, you will most likely find yourself struggling to solve the puzzle inside the space of the dots, as though the outer dots constituted the outer limits of the puzzle..." (p13).



Theory U and cross-cultural ministry both invite us to take seriously the space beyond our dots, and to find enlightenment and enrichment on a journey that can bring to birth possibilities as yet unseen.

It is that journey that we shared in the Symposium and which is ongoing; and who knows, alongside the daffodil, the rose, and the hibiscus, there might yet be a ROBISDIL!

\*\*\*\*\*



The Revd **Ermal Kirby** is a Research Officer at the Susanna Wesley Foundation: his main research focus examines Cultural Diversity and Methodist Circuit Ministry.

Ermal has extensive experience of living with diversity: born in Antigua and coming to England when eight; being educated in a predominantly white school while remaining rooted within the black British community; studying at the Wesleyan College in Barbados and at Oxford University; ministering for forty years with congregations in inner city, city centre and suburban contexts; serving as a Staff member of the CTBI, and then as Tutor in a Theological College before becoming Chair of the London Methodist District – the most diverse District in British Methodism. For the past four years he has been a Circuit Minister in South Africa where he was a member of the Cape Welsh Choir.

Ermal is the Superintendent of the Barking, Dagenham and Ilford Circuit.

He is married to Jenni, who is also a Methodist Minister, and they have three sons and four grandchildren.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Bibliography**

Scharmer, O. 2007. *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges*. (Cambridge, MA: Society for Organizational Learning).

Zander, B. & R. Stone Zander. 2000. *The Art of Possibility*, (Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA).