

Notting Hill Methodist Church: a church in and of the world.

I came to the Migration and Ministry conference not as a minister or even a Christian, but as a doctoral student who had just finished writing about the important work of a team of Methodist ministers in 1960s Notting Hill, London. It is an unusual story, one which shocked and surprised me repeatedly throughout the journey of (re)constructing it, and I want here to pull out a few of the reasons why I think their experiment was so successful.

The Team Ministry comprised of Revd David Mason, Revd Geoffrey Ainger, and Revd Norwyn Denny, and they spent the 1960s openly fighting racism and other forms of social inequalities in Notting Hill. This, in itself, is an unusual enough statement given the general narrative of racism and rejection in respect of how white Christians treated black Christians in the post-war era. Moreover, not only did the Team Ministry fight to generally improve the lives of the black and white working-class inhabitants of Notting Hill, but in doing so, their church flourished. At the beginning of the decade, the *active* church membership was 82 people, but by the end it was 360 people. Such a pronounced growth in a period of so-called decline, shows that the importance of their experiment lies not just in their commitment to fighting injustice, but also in how their social and political involvement led to an invigorated and vibrant church body.

If just one aspect of the Team Ministry's approach were to be singled out as the keystone to the experiment, it would have to be their philosophy of 'empty-handedness'. This philosophy required that the ministers *listened* to the needs of the neighbourhood in order to better understand how to serve it. The simplicity of this pivotal idea effectively guaranteed that the experiment would result in success, if by success we understand a church useful and relevant to the community it was there to serve. For, by having the humility to stand before the neighbourhood and ask what it needed and wanted (as opposed to assuming that their vocation provided them with the answers and solutions), the ministers rooted themselves deep into the lives, needs, and aspirations of the various communities of Notting Hill. For instance, one manifestation of this philosophy was the development of house churches. House churches were not a traditional or typical aspect of Methodism, but the ministers encouraged them in response to the needs of black Christians who did not come to evening services because of fear of the racist violence which still regularly occurred throughout the first half of the 1960s. The house churches therefore functioned as a vital safe-space wherein black Christians could develop kinship networks, discuss employment or housing problems, and escape the violence of the street.

The ministers were so effective in their work because they were a team of three, and this teamwork is the second aspect that I wish to highlight. The theology of their partnership resided in the theme of *koinonia* which they understood as a type of Christian fellowship with all possible barriers broken down between people. As well as partnering with each other, this theology also resulted in a strong emphasis on partnership with other people and organisations. This meant not only a larger Group Ministry involving their wives and other local Christians, but also strong and enduring relationships with people and communities

who were not a part of any church. Because the ministers acknowledged the multiplicity of communities operating in the neighbourhood, they developed a coalition style of working. In this, they sought to unite the differing groups of Notting Hill without being desirous of Christian conversions, nor of universalising any particular point of view. We can witness this aspect very strongly in the establishment of the Notting Hill Social Council and the many coalitions it entered into such as housing activism in conjunction with Community Workshop, and its support of the Kensington and Chelsea Inter-Racial Council. Additionally, the ministers allowed the basement of the Lancaster Road church to be used by local musicians for shows until it eventually became known as the venue 'The Crypt'.

In effect, much of what the ministers did can be seen as a form of border-crossing: they passed through the church walls and went beyond the Christian community, but never beyond their Christian faith. It is this border-crossing which resulted in the last pivotal aspect that I wish to highlight: their social and political involvement. Like Bishop John Robinson, the ministers knew that they could not be concerned with the reality of (working-class) people's lives without entering into the field of politics. They knew that personal kindness would not eradicate racism, fix inadequate housing, give children safe play-spaces, or create employment opportunities. They understood that the problems people faced were institutional, social, and systemic, and as such, they knew that a strong engagement in those areas was necessary in order to have the chance of effecting any real and meaningful change. In practise this meant things like setting up an out-of-hours GP clinic for the children of 'immigrant mothers' who were unable to take their kids to the GPs during normal hours because they were working; protecting the black youths who were the predominant members of their youth-club from police harassment by disallowing the police to enter the church basement; and offering the use of their Ecumenical Centre to the World Council of Churches for their deeply significant 1969 Consultation on White Racism.

The three things I have highlighted above are hard to tease apart: their philosophy of 'empty-handedness' meant they *listened* to the needs of the neighbourhood which resulted in *partnerships* with other individuals, groups, and communities, which necessitated the social and political *border-crossings*. Through this, the Team Ministry and the Notting Hill Methodist Church, became a type of gestalt entity which positively affected the lives of thousands more than the three or four hundred they counted as active members. Importantly, by asking of the needs of their new black neighbours, by listening to their responses, and by acting in solidarity with their wishes, the ministers transformed the church from an under-used, middle-class, middle-aged, majority-white church, into a vibrant, flourishing, majority-black church, more truly representative of those inhabiting the neighbourhood in which it sat. It is for this reason that the story of the Notting Hill Methodist Church can serve as a fruitful inspiration to those seeking a contemporary renewal of the church.

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