

The Diversity Quadrille: Will you join the Dance?

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1. Introduction

Movement, migration, crossing boundaries, intermingling genes: that has been the story of the human race from its beginning to the present day. Driven by curiosity or need, forced or freely chosen, in the face of resistance, and sometimes at unbelievable cost; human beings have never 'stayed put' for very long, but have always responded to the urge, the need, or the opportunity to broaden their experience and explore new spaces.

In the last fifty years in Britain, this historic human tendency has been increasingly regarded as problematic, and attempts have been made to limit, channel and control the flow. So, post-Windrush, the mood changed from one of welcoming members of the Empire, who could help rebuild the nation's economy and its services, to one of becoming wary of being 'swamped' by aliens and strangers.

And it's not just in Britain that this reaction has been seen: countries that have a history of welcoming strangers have found more recently that migration has become problematical politically, and stricter measures have been put in place to limit or halt migration. However, despite all the laws that have been passed, the messages of discouragement that have been sent, and the lives that have been lost, the flow has continued: moving, mixing and mingling are still characteristic of the human family – in Britain, as around the world.

So, what lessons are we to learn from this and, in particular, what insights do Christians offer in the shared search for understanding and responsible action?

In this paper I reflect on the findings of a Research Project that I have been conducting at the Susanna

Wesley Foundation: I use the metaphor of an invitation to a dance, The Diversity Quadrille (with apologies to Lewis Carroll). I argue that the fundamental teachings of the Christian faith offer a starting point for a more positive attitude to diversity, that there are certain key attitudes and dispositions that make it easier for people to 'join the dance', and that there needs to be a re-orientation and renewed sense of engagement on the part of the Church.

2. Migration and the Church

The debate around migration has particular poignancy within the Church, where it is recognised that in addition to historical, practical and political factors, there are theological perspectives to be taken into account. Harvey Kwiyani, a Malawian mission scholar and practitioner working in Britain, said at the Susanna Wesley Foundation Annual Conference in 2016, "The story of the Judaeo-Christian religion, from beginning to end, is a story about migration."¹

In the Methodist Church in Britain, of the 1,600 active ministers, there are just over a hundred (6%) whose place of personal or parental origin is outside Britain.² In the London District that proportion is much

higher, with 32% of ministers in that category in 2016-17.³

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3. Methodology

At the beginning of 2016, the Susanna Wesley Foundation formally approved a research project to

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.⁴

The project had three elements: Qualitative Research – conducting interviews with 20 ministers who self-identified as being engaged in cross-cultural ministry; Focus Group discussions with Circuit Stewards (the senior lay people who work with ministers in defined geographical areas); and a Symposium that brought together some of the research participants and representatives of the wider Church – Methodists and ecumenical partners.

4. Findings - approaches

The debate around cultural diversity is often emotionally charged, and that applies as much within the Church as in the wider society. The research showed that in the experience of ministers, it was easier for them and the congregations to engage with issues of diversity when there were certain basic attitudes prevalent – or when, if you like, certain dance steps had been learned. These steps involved attitude and perception changes in the areas of compassion and justice, creativity and enrichment, and theological understandings of the unity of all people. I explore each of these below.

4.1 Compassion and Justice

The first theme to emerge from the research data was compassion, and in this case it is not about people feeling sorry for themselves, nor expecting others to feel sorry for them because they have had a hard time. It is used in the literal sense of com-*passion*, ‘feeling with’, entering into the experience of another, as we hear their story and grasp something of their hopes, dreams and fears. It is ‘co-sensing’, being together and being sensitive to one another.

Much of the pain that comes to be associated with cultural diversity within the Church and in wider society, arises because of a lack of compassion. In the Church there is the clear teaching of texts such as 1 Corinthians 12, reminding us that we are all members of one Body, and that each part of the Body suffers when one part suffers. But that was clearly not accepted by one church member who made it clear that he would not receive the

Sacrament of Holy Communion from the hands of a black minister.⁵ Clearly, he did not imagine, or did not care, what it was like for the minister to hear his words.

The lack of compassion is seen also in the attitudes that were revealed in relation to the use of language: interviewees reported that some congregants seemed not to recognise what it was like for a minister to be preaching, or leading a meeting, in what might be their second or third language, and became impatient and dismissive because of the way in which the minister spoke, rather than focusing on the substance of the message. In the interviews, it was clear that compassion, an awareness of the needs of congregants, had prompted ministers to go even further in adapting their accents, or changing the pace and rhythms of their speaking so that the people in their pastoral care might more readily understand what the ministers were saying.

In wider society, a lack of compassion makes it easier not to see ‘the other’ as a fellow human being, and to deny them access to the safety or the services they need for survival. It can also lead to scepticism about the circumstances and real dangers that force some people to leave their places of origin. (A fifteen-year-old girl does not choose willingly to leave her home and family and to play a deadly game of hide-and-seek with rebel troops, and risk her life crossing continents, to cite just one example that I came across in the course of my work.) How much compassion is evident in the policies that are upheld by governments and the practices being developed in relation to migrants and asylum seekers?

And if compassion does not move us to join the dance, what about the call of justice?

Much of the pain that comes to be associated with cultural diversity within the Church and in wider society, arises because of a lack of compassion.

Most humans carry within themselves an innate sense of what is fair and right; and though these will vary from one culture to another, certain fundamentals might be seen as universal. Promises should be kept, reparation or redress should be offered when someone has suffered injury or loss because of the way that systems and structures have impacted their lives, and changes should be made to those structures to ensure that the damage is not repeated.

Is it that sense of justice that has been re-kindled through the highlighting of the experience of the Windrush Generation, and if so, to which other groups caught up in the continuing movement of peoples around the world might it be applied?

Within the Methodist Church, among some of the ministers whose places of personal or family origin are outside the UK, there is a perception that the number of them who become involved in disputes and disciplinary procedures is much greater than would be expected from a simple pro-rata estimate. It is not possible to either confirm or disprove this assertion, because the Church does not keep such statistics, but it has led to the question whether we can be confident that the Church's processes are fair and just, or whether there might be bias – perhaps unconscious bias – in the way in which the procedures are carried out.

Justice is one of the most fundamental principles of Christian living, based, we believe, on the very nature of God. The call to 'do justice' is an inescapable challenge within the church, as well as a rallying point for our engaging with the policies of the wider society.

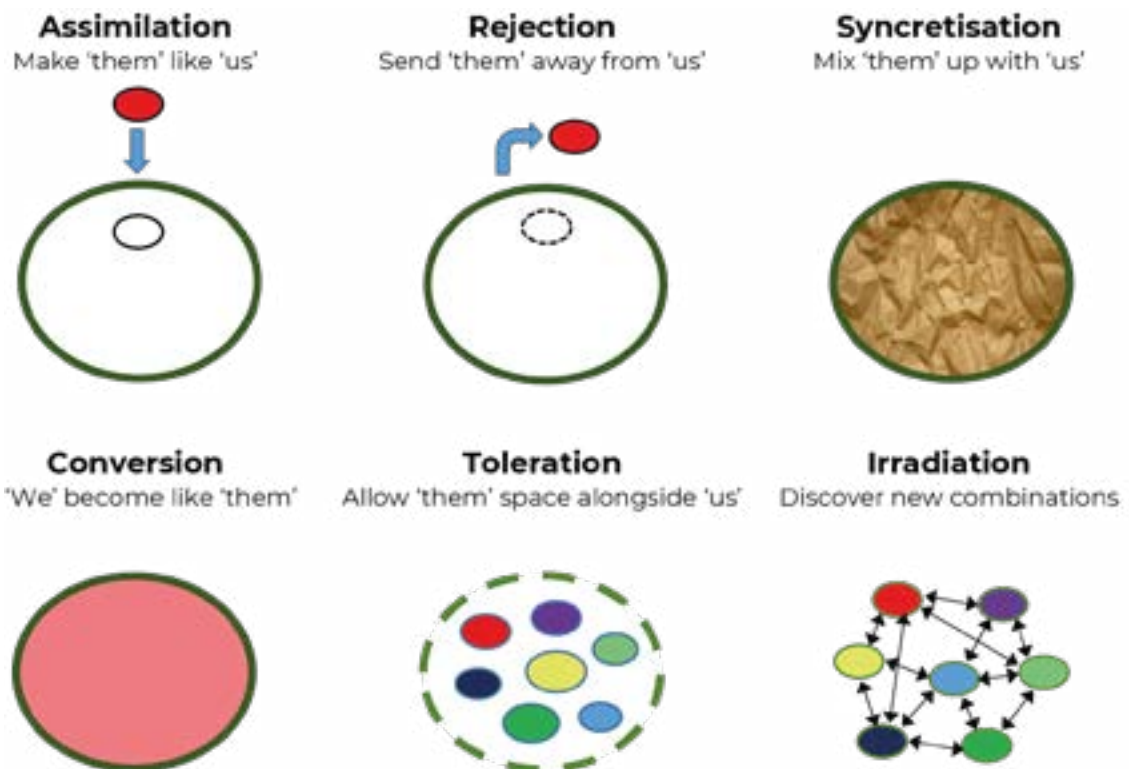
Some research participants suggested that attitudes of compassion and justice should lead the Church to follow the example of Jesus in 'putting the poor first'; or in offering 'servant leadership'; and in reaching people 'on the back row'. Being involved in ministry across cultures seems to make people more aware of who is not (yet) included in the dance, and to ask how we might take account of the experiences of those who are different from ourselves; they recognise that some of the challenges we face today in church and society arise directly from decisions taken by our forebears, or are the mirror images of past actions. The dance goes on.

It is not just attitudes of compassion and justice that might stir us to join the dance; there are other drives.

4.2 Creativity and Enrichment

Prompted partly by the stories I heard during the research, and drawing also on my own experience of community development work in inner city areas, I have been putting forward a series of models to illustrate different options that are available to us as we encounter people whose customs and ways of being are different from our own. These are described briefly below in the diagram.

Some members of the Focus Groups saw the extent to which their expectations were based on the 'Assimilation' model – that they (had) expected the minister to fit in with their ways of doing things. Others believed that there had been 'Toleration' – making allowances for different ways of doing things, by the minister and by different 'national fellowships' within the congregation. Ministers spoke of the history of 'Rejection' that still cast a shadow over relationships within the church. There seemed to be no appetite for 'Syncretisation' – too much like putting a three course meal through a blender and expecting everyone to enjoy the result. 'Conversion', in the cultural sense, was also off the menu. There was, however, an openness to 'Irradiation' and a willingness to explore what it might look like in practice.



In the wider society, we see how 'fusion' and 'mash-up' are commonly accepted, for example in music and the arts, or in cooking – and I would see these as examples of 'Irradiation'. But alongside this, we hear regular comments from people who express the fear that 'their culture' is being lost, or that incomers do not understand 'British culture', though that is not usually defined.

Perhaps that is where the dance can help us. What if our life together were to be imagined as an ever-changing dance, where new steps can be introduced, and new rhythms and movements explored; where each encounter with 'the other' was approached as an opportunity to experience irradiation as we discover new aspects of our shared humanity?

While it is hard to imagine any sort of political or social process that might persuade everyone to adopt a new 'culture', it is entirely conceivable that there can be incremental changes in attitudes, and that our innate creativity, and a new openness that is willing to take advantage of opportunities for enrichment, would make us more willing to learn to dance in different ways – even with those we once saw as aliens and strangers.

Within the Methodist Church, in the four areas of 'Our Calling' (Worship, Learning and Caring, Service, and Evangelism), there are examples of how communities can be enriched by approaches that reflect the diversity of the Church. The Methodist Conference has declared its commitment to being 'an inclusive and multicultural community of faith', and this will require a more intentional and open conversation at all levels within the Methodist Church about the attitudes and aims that underpin our intercultural engagement.

Perhaps the most important perspective offered by the research was in relation to where all this 'mingling and mixing' was leading: was there a shared vision of the goal or purpose of this continuing movement of peoples? One possibility that emerged was around the notion of Completion, described by one minister as, 'Working together for something bigger...reaching for something new'.

4.3 Completion

Completion is about achieving fulfilment, being made whole, with everything that was lacking now supplied; it's about reaching an end point, a 'telos', where purpose is realised.

People come in all shapes, sizes and complexions – with histories and cultures that are complex and multi-faceted – but we all comprise one single human race. Science and theology are as one in attesting to that truth.

So, listening to the different stories of the interviews, and reflecting on other stories of movement around the world, one interpretation that I would offer of what we are seeing in the migration and mingling that is characteristic of this age, is that it is the human family 'realizing' its destiny, overcoming its separation and division, and being challenged to discover its essential unity – a unity in diversity.

In the Christian Scriptures (Ephesians 2: 15-22, for example), there is the innovative proposition that the central aim, and the true purpose, of the 'Jesus Story' was to create a single new humanity, by getting rid of the walls of separation between different parts of humanity and bridging the whole of humanity to God. Could it be that a divinely discerned algorithm is at work, and that what we are seeing in the increasing diversity of communities across the world today is a movement towards the fulfilment of that vision? While, for many, that diversity might seem problematic and fraught with tension, the outcome can be an experience of the unity in diversity of the human family – humanity made whole.

Visions are ways of seeing; invitations to see 'what is' in a different way. Visions can create new realities. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin described the Church as a "sign, and foretaste, and instrument" of God's kingdom.⁶

The 'Cultural Diversity and Circuit Ministry' Project shows that the Methodist Church cannot yet claim that it has achieved its goal in relation to its engagement with cultural diversity. A report to the Methodist Conference in 2017 summed up its work in this area as the 'Unfinished Agenda'.

Ministers involved in cross cultural ministry are uniquely qualified to help the Church address that agenda, but the whole Church needs to recognise the true significance of this work, and to show unambiguously that we are all ready to join in the dance.

In the book of Revelation, the final book of the Christian Bible, there is a vision of widespread, prolonged devastation, suffering, disturbance, and conflict – no synchronised, harmonious dancing here. But that disturbing picture is part of a wider vision that involves all nations and tribes and peoples and languages gathered before the throne of God, united in

praise and celebration (Rev 7: 9-12); there is offered a vision of hope, and the healing of the nations.

In some parts of the Methodist Church people are catching sight of a new vision, and long to have that vision shared with the whole society – to see the movement and mingling and mixing of peoples, not as a threat to be countered, nor as an aberration to be corrected, but rather as a welcome step for the whole of humanity as we journey together into the future that God is shaping for us and through us. To prepare for, and participate in, that emerging reality, will demand of us all, penitence and hope, patience and commitment.

The specific steps of the dance cannot be presented as a list of proposals: that was certainly not provided by this research. Rather what it pointed to was the need for a new way for different groups to relate within the Methodist Church. We need to find new ways of not just hearing one another's stories, but of truly sensing one another's hopes and fears, of sharing dreams and visions, and discovering the creative energies within us. This is a task for the Church in all its parts - local, regional, connexional; and all its processes - conferring, celebrating, serving. Learning how to be a diverse and inclusive Church is a lesson that needs to be learned urgently, for the benefit of the Church and the wider society – and to be true to the God who created us.

We discover what that means in practice, not by sitting on one side, observing others as they try to figure out the steps of the dance, but by ourselves becoming part of the dance and trusting the Lord of the Dance to guide our steps as we dance the 'Diversity Quadrille'.

5. Coda

Some people are natural dancers; they hear music and without their even thinking about it, they begin to move their feet, their head, their arms, their whole body: they dance. Others, like me, need a bit of prompting and encouragement – we want to know what the dance is about; and what are the right steps; and whether it's safe to engage in those movements.

It was reassuring for me when I came to live in England at the age of eight, and I was first introduced to 'country dance' at the primary school I attended. I discovered that there were different steps, and that each dance had its own shape and movement, and that all of this could be learned. But, later on, I discovered that dancing, or not dancing,

often depended on the attitudes we adopt, in the sense both of our posture, and of our predilections.

Lucy Berry offers a beguiling insight into the dynamics of intercultural dancing in her poem 'You look like you could dance'.⁷

Author

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

Ermal has extensive experience of living with diversity: born in Antigua and coming to England when eight; educated in a predominantly white school while rooted within the black British community; studying in Barbados and at Oxford University; ministering for forty years with congregations in city centre and suburban contexts; serving as a CBTI Staff member, and then as Tutor in a Theological College before becoming Chair of the London Methodist District – the most diverse in British Methodism. He also spent four years as 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.

Following up

As part of its work on transforming communities and the application of the principles of 'Theory U', The Susanna Wesley Foundation is committed to engaging with groups to research ways in which new possibilities can be encouraged and nurtured in the life of the Church as well as in the wider community. Do contact the Susanna Wesley Foundation if you would like to be involved in that work.

This research formed the foundation for the development of SWF's Diversity, Otherness and Privilege conversation guide and accompanying resources, developed by Dr Emma Pavey. Find them at <https://susannawesleyfoundation.org/diversity-otherness-and-privilege-booklet-full-colour-pdf/>

Endnotes

1. <http://susannawesleyfoundation.org/opening-plenary/>.
2. Based on the mailing list of the Belonging Together Ministers' Group, an informal network of ministers, formerly known as the Black Methodist Ministers Group.
3. Calculated from the London Methodist District Directory, based on the author's personal knowledge of ministers (as former Chair of District).
4. Remit of the 'Cultural Diversity and Circuit Ministry' Project; SWF
5. Referred to in one interview.
6. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995) p. 110.
7. Poetry from the 2016 Susanna Wesley Foundation conference <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChS4cHJ6pr8&t=895s> , at 14 minutes, 50 seconds.