



Sermon preached by Karen Campbell on 30th January 2022

Epiphany IV. Readings: Genesis 17.1-8; I Corinthians 13.1-13

Address for World Church Sunday service.

I have to confess – before David extended the invitation for me to be involved in your service today, I had never heard of World Church Sunday.

I felt a bit embarrassed, more than a little daunted. Should I know? Why don't I know? What will I say?

Even with these questions bubbling in my mind, I heard my lips accept the invitation – they obviously hadn't consulted with my head! So, having committed, what could I make of it...?

At some point I went to a very reliable friend who I often consult in those blank-mind moments... but on this occasion, Google couldn't help! So, what was I going to do...?

Well, I thought about it a bit more – World Church Sunday. Maybe I didn't need to feel embarrassed. Why? Because 'World Church' has never been a theoretical or remote concept I needed to engage with; World Church is – and always has been – my lived reality.

I grew up in Tottenham, North London – and in my lifetime, Tottenham has always been an extremely diverse place. I was surrounded by, and immersed in, 'the world'.

I was raised in a predominantly Black, Caribbean church, where I stayed until my early twenties. I later found my way to High Cross URC – a church where one third of the congregation was Ghanaian, just under one third was Jamaican, and the other third consisted of people from 'the rest of the world' – including a little place you may know, called Britain.

Seriously, though, I saw how smaller or newer cultural groups can get consumed by larger or more dominant groups. There was often a default perception that all the African members were Ghanaian – which they weren't; all the Caribbean members were Jamaican – which they weren't; and these dynamics, if left unaddressed, threatened to give rise to all kinds of issues and ill feelings.

At some point, I was employed as the High Cross Church Ministry Enabler – and I had great fun devising projects and initiatives in response to the church and community dynamics. Amongst these initiatives was an annual International Day – spotlighting the different nationalities, showcasing their foods, cultures, flags, traditions – creating opportunities for the invisible to be seen and recognised and valued. People from all backgrounds were drawn into the events, keen to share from their contexts, and enabled to discover new things about each other – to go deeper than surface appearances. It was fun, but it was also very serious, and important. Those were happy days... and days of being well-fed!

While at Tottenham, I was also drawn into the URC's bi-annual Multicultural Celebration, organised under the remit of my predecessor, Michael Jagessar. I don't know whether any of you had opportunity to join in any of those occasions – but they were wonderful. Whilst the usual picture painted of the URC is of a mainly white, mainly middle-class, mainly aging denomination, these occasions brought together URC members and friends of all ages and backgrounds who hailed from all around the globe – faces and foods and national dress of all different colours; music and dance and poetry and comedy spanning different continents. Right there, we saw the 'World Church' – in our midst, an integral part of 'our Church' and who we are.

I left Tottenham to take up CRCW ministry in Luton. I don't know what you know about Luton, but it is uber-diverse! My post was held by a small, Christian community development programme called Grassroots, which works with and alongside people of all faiths and backgrounds. Grassroots is headed up by David Jonathan (Johny) a former Mission Partner from India, and member of the

URC. (Not directly relevant, but you may recently have seen Johnny featured on the URC website as he was awarded an MBE in the New Year's Honours List.)

I was specifically called to work with an ecumenical group of churches amongst Christians from all parts of the world, journeying with them to discover what it might mean to be the Church in this predominantly Muslim part of Luton. One of the member bodies was the Asian Christian Fellowship – mainly Christians from Pakistan, who keenly felt and referred to the persecution of the Church and Christians 'back home'. So, even whilst I was working locally, to build relations with the majority Muslim population, there was a real and fully understandable tension for some of my members. When engaging with the World Church – or World Church issues – it is not always easy to practise the Christian principles many of us can easily speak when we have not walked in the other's shoes. It is not always a comfortable journey.

Within a couple of weeks of arriving in Luton, I was asked to work with the newly-formed Luton Roma Church, which would be worshipping in the building of one of my Methodist churches. The Roma people – one of the most reviled groups wherever they pitch up – and, to be honest, I didn't want to work with them either. I had no experience, no language – and no desire – not helped by the fact that, while on holiday in Spain that summer, my Sister had been completely fleeced by two Roma women. But here I was – a minister of the Church, a Church Related Community Worker to boot - encouraging other Christians to put their faith into practical action; wasn't this exactly what I was being challenged to do? So, whether I wanted to or not, that's what I did.

I worked with the Roma community for most of my 10 years in Luton. It was hard. At times, especially in the early days, it genuinely felt like being tortured – then returning again and again for more. The language, the customs, the norms, the values in this church and amongst this people were so different from anything I had encountered before. And yet I found myself as something of a bridge between my mainstream churches and the Luton Roma Church, creating touching places where each could risk encountering the other, assumptions could be challenged – and even if barriers were not completely brought down, people on both sides could see a little better why things were the way they were. I encouraged each to try to see from the other's perspective; imagine what it might be like to walk in their shoes.

I worked mainly with the Roma children – and let's just say their behaviour frequently left a lot to be desired! I wasn't fazed – I come from Jamaican parentage! - but the same can't be said for everyone. We had some very well-meaning white British Christians who came to volunteer with the beautiful sentiment, 'I just want to bless them!' - but by the end of their first session, they were virtually on the ground twitching, never to be seen again!

Personally, I loved those children (most of the time!) – I learned that they, their parents, their communities, are products of their contexts and their history. I had to take them as I found them; love them even when I didn't like them.

Being in the midst of the World Church can be challenging, to say the least.

My present role at Global & Intercultural Ministries is a different context again. In many ways, the World Church crosses my desk.

Much of the URC's World Church engagement is through CWM – the Council for World Mission - linking us with churches in different regions, including Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, and the Pacific. Connections are as exotic and as far afield as Wales!

Through CWM we have fostered partnerships which currently see us hosting Partners in Mission (PiM) from the Presbyterian Church of Korea and the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. At the end of December, Alison Gibbs retired from her post as a headteacher in Zambia, having completed 36 years as a Partner in Mission sent by the URC – Alison was CWM's longest-serving mission partner. Even as Alison retires, we have two URC Ministers - Melanie Smith and Mark Meatcher -

waiting for paperwork to be finalised so they can take up positions with the Pacific Theological College in Fiji. I fondly think of them as our PiM babies!

Also held under the Global & Intercultural Ministries umbrella is Commitment for Life, the URC's global justice programme, spearheaded by my colleague Kevin Snyman. Commitment for Life is currently working with partners in Zimbabwe, Israel & the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Bangladesh, and – for now, Central America. Another strand of our work is encouraging and supporting Synod Global Partnerships to foster meaningful relationships between URC Synods and Church partners in different parts of the world.

It is interesting that a major concern for the Church in the UK is 'Church survival'; we fret about shrinking numbers; how long are we going to last... and, for some of us, a real concern is that *my* church should last long enough to take my funeral!!!

By way of contrast, we have Church partners in Syria and Lebanon, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Zimbabwe, Myanmar – places where the challenges range from persecution and restrictive politics to war and unrest, poverty and climate disaster – places where Church survival is about literal human survival.

As our partners, I wonder to what extent do their concerns become our concerns, and vice versa?

Let me come back to *us*, even as we think about the World Church. Because the Church – wherever it is – is for the world. And the people 'over there' are right here – in our congregations and in our communities! We have people from all around the globe in the midst of the URC. We have multi-ethnic congregations. We have Pakistani and Korean and Taiwanese Fellowships. We have close links with the two Ghanaian Presbyteries based in London. There are congregations in London doing wonderful children's and youth work engaging local Sikh and Hindu and Muslim communities, even fostering youth leadership from amongst those groups. We have Synods with global partnership links to various places; individuals with family and social ties back to Myanmar. We have ministers from Pakistan, Korea, Taiwan, the Caribbean, Africa, Europe – and the UK – all serving in our Church. If we want pointers and insights and guidance as to the concerns and realities of the World Church, we have 'experts' right here amongst us and around us. But how do we value them? How do we call on them? How do we make their voices heard?

I am really glad that the URC is a multicultural Church – a Church where many different cultures are present. We now need to ensure we are an intercultural Church – where the different cultures are given space to make a difference – to who we are and how we operate, the things we do and say, the people we listen and respond and relate to, the issues to which we give our attention – and even our money.

Different people hailing from different places, facing different opportunities and different challenges. Not always easy, not always what we would want or expect – but One Church, truly committed to journeying together. United yet diverse; diverse yet united – following the one Christ, and serving our one God. Surely that is the vision for the World Church. And I want to propose exactly that as the vision for the URC. Amen.

I'm going to finish by reading a poem written a long time ago for one of the URC Multicultural Celebrations which feels very relevant today:

A Table for All

Come as you are, because you are welcome.
Come take your place, and hear now the call,
The table is spread, and the music is playing -
Come take your place at the Table for All.

Don't ponder now who you think is worthy,
When, where or how RSVP they sent;
Instead come with gladness, and joy overflowing,
For each person present was God's first intent.
No special place for royal or mighty,
Earthly wealth and position a thing of the past
At the Table prepared with upside-down values,
Where the last shall be first, and the first shall be last.
No longer division 'tween haves and the have nots;
Here no oppressed, neither those who oppress.
Where the world has said 'no' to dignity of justice,
Our God, at His Table, says 'yes'.
And don't be fooled into thinking God does not see colour;
His Table for All is no sea of grey -
God creates and admires, and declares 'It is good!'
No matter what racist or bigot may say.
God calls to His people from every direction,
From the east to the west, the north and the south;
There's drink for the thirsty of every nation,
A banquet abundant for every mouth.
A rainbow of women and men at God's Table;
Different languages, customs, and faiths from all lands,
Invited to sit, talk and learn all together,
More human made by the joining of hearts and of hands.
So come sit with prince, and come sit with pauper,
With old and with young freely come take your rest;
Whatever the label, the burden you carry,
Lay it down, for now you are most honoured guest.
And let us not wait to dine at that Table,
For though it's not yet, the Table is now-
Where valleys are filled, and mountains are levelled
And a sharing of fate emerges somehow.
Oh the Table is spread, and the music is playing,
Let's listen and hear and respond to God's call,
And live into being the Kingdom we cry for -
The Table with room for All.

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Karen Campbell, URC Secretary for Global and Intercultural Ministries

... and a **Reflection on Karen Campbell's address**: David Reynolds

Well, the picture Karen paints of the 'World Church' makes me pause. For her it's not a theoretical concept or something remote. But an integral part of her Christian experience.

The world church in *her* world started in Tottenham. A church that was predominantly Ghanaian and Jamaica.

Then she continued in Luton – a ministry with Christians of a Pakistani background, often in tension with the local Muslim majority.

And she also worked with Luton's Roma Church – trying to create what she calls 'touching places where each could risk encountering the other' – prodding and coaxing different groups to 'see from the other's perspective' and to 'imagine what it might be like to walk in their shoes.'

Now, as the URC's Secretary for Global & Intercultural Ministries, the World Church crosses her desk every day.

Church partners in Syria and Lebanon, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Zimbabwe, Myanmar – as well as those supported by the URC's global justice programme – Commitment for Life – especially in Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, and in Israel/Palestine.

She also engages with people from 'over there' who are right here in the URC's multi-ethnic congregations.

In our Pakistani, Korean and Taiwanese Fellowships. Served by ministers from those countries and from across Africa, Europe and the Caribbean – all working in our Church.

Not to mention the occasional outlier from really exotic places like the United States!

Karen gives thanks that the URC is a multi-cultural church – a Church where many different cultures are present.

But she also wants it to be an inter-cultural Church – meaning one where the different cultures are taken seriously and given space to make a difference.

Making a difference to who we are and how we operate, to the things we do and say, to the people we heed and relate to, the issues to which we give our attention – and our money.

What she calls in her poem a 'Table for All' prepared with 'upside-down values, where the last shall be first, and the first shall be last.'

This is a vision of the URC in and for the world that's very different from the stereotype of the URC as 'a mainly white, mainly middle-class, mainly ageing denomination.'

Yet that stereotype – to be honest – fits Downing Place all too well.

For me, Karen's vision certainly poses awkward questions about the faith I hold.

Seventy years ago, J.B. Phillips published a little book, which became a classic: *Your God is Too Small*.

One can extend this challenge – too white, too middle-class, too male, too old . . . too everything.

Because each of us always tends to 'make' God in our own image.

If you want to risk being challenged further, please join me this evening on Zoom to hear more from Karen about the journey towards making the URC a genuinely anti-racist church. And why that means facing up to some less agreeable aspects of our past, especially as the Legacies of Slavery.

Professor David Reynolds, Convenor of the Downing Place World Church and Public Issues Group