

A Discussion Paper from Barnardo's CANDL Project

This is one of a series of discussion papers dealing with current and controversial questions for the church in modern society, and primarily distributed with our quarterly newsletter. Our aim in these papers is to provoke debate and action. As such, the views and questions expressed herein are sometimes quite deliberately blunt and to the point, but do not necessarily represent the policy of Barnardo's.

Black Majority Church - What's in a name?

The tragedy of the death of Victoria has been widely covered in the news. Quite a few of the articles have described the churches or Pastors involved as Black Majority Churches (BMC). I have for a long time questioned the use of this label, as I have never been satisfied that this label actually tells you very much about the belief system of a group.

It was therefore a pleasant surprise to read an article, in the Christian Child Care Forum's newsletter, on the involvement of the Churches Child Protection Advisory Service in the Victoria Climbié enquiry. Toward the end of David Pearson's article he writes: "We must all learn from these tragic events. Often the churches that were involved with Victoria Climbié have been referred to as 'black led'. This is misleading. The church which has come in for most criticism is Brazilian in origin. Another church is part of a traditional denomination with a well-developed and respected child protection policy and the Pastor was trained at a well-known traditional theological college. The Pastor of the third church was also trained within a 'white-led' church denomination".

These points made by David echo points made by Joel Edwards friends in the book *Let's Praise Him Again*, first published in 1992. The opening chapter 'Black, Black led or what?' explores the origins of the label. Arlington Trotman points out "An important aspect of this self-examination is the process by which identity has been conferred on these church groups by researchers and social scientists." He goes on in the same chapter to say "Only within the past twenty years have these terms come into the relevant literature, especially from the mid to late 70's, and more recently by the Community Religions project of the Department of Theology and Religious studies at Leeds studies". At the time *Let's Praise Him Again* was published the popular label was 'Black led'. Rev. Trotman wrote: "congregations referred to as the 'black church' are not exclusively comprised of black people. A number of the established denominations in Britain have white leadership at their American headquarters, for example the Wesleyan Holiness Church, the new Testament Church of God and the Church of God of prophecy." Ira Brooks, in his introduction for *Where do we go from here?* written some 20 years ago, states: "We have come to be referred to by the term 'black -led'. This is not the way we see ourselves. The term to us seems to separate white from black Christians in one church".

Comments like these led to the search for a more 'acceptable' label and "Black Majority Church" has become the preferred choice. At the Churches Community Work Alliance conference in 1999, CANDL presented a paper entitled *What do we mean by "Black Majority Church"?*. In this paper and presentation, which questioned the value of the term, the following definitions were suggested:

"BMC can refer to:

- A church which belongs to one of the larger denominations identified as originating in the black community e.g. New Testament Church of God
- An independent church originating in the black community (with a leadership and membership/congregation largely of black people)
- Any church which has a leadership largely or completely of black people
- Any church in which the majority of the members/congregation is black (including Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, URC, etc)."

It is fair to say that not everyone will agree with these definitions, but they certainly describe the diversity of the groups that CANDL has worked with over the years. There is so much diversity within the groupings above. Add to this consideration of differences between first, second and third generation Caribbean-originating people, and between African and Caribbean cultures? There is also a quite common (in inner London) experience of "mainstream" churches such as Anglican being "Island"-majority churches - sometimes over 90% from one Caribbean island background, though often still having a white minister. This diversity of the so-called BMC's indicates that the term may tell us more about what we don't know than what we do.

When considering David Pearson's, Arlington Trotman's and Ira Brooks' points, it seems to me that we are still using a label to describe a church which doesn't tell us much about the group's theology in the same way the use of "Anglican", "Baptist" or "Pentecostal" might have been used in the past. Consider also the growing number of independent churches which have chosen to have a name which neither identifies them by colour nor by denomination, e.g. Ruach, Kingsway, Victory. Another popular New Testament Church of God is known as 'Cathedral of Praise'. Many of these churches have a large number of people who are 2nd and 3rd generation Caribbean, and also members from a broader cultural range. You have to ask yourself "what's in a name?".

In a discussion with an assistant minister of a church in south London whose leadership consists of both black and white people, she commented: "There is a growing number of independent churches, where you are now seeing much more of a mix, with some of these congregations refusing any labels, including BME-led, even if looking at the leadership this is what they are." She then went on to speculate "maybe there is a meltdown occurring where 'spirituality begins to reign and not culturality'." But that's a whole new discussion and I am still left asking what's in a name and how many labels it will take to provide helpful information on a group?

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If you want to respond to any of the above points, or follow-up any of the proposals made, please do get in touch with us at CANDL.

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