

# Diverse People Inhabiting Praise Together

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## Abstract

The Archbishops' Commission on Racial Justice examined the potential for broadening cultural expression within the liturgy. The idea of incorporating other 'musicks' can be challenging for exponents of the English Choral Tradition. The cultural gap between the so called 'popular' and 'classical' musical traditions is sometimes a repellent, rather than an attraction. Furthermore, the ongoing challenge of maintaining our distinctive and precious choral tradition means that cathedral musicians may have little capacity to do the cross-cultural work of exploring, understanding, and then arranging the musicks of other emerging cultural traditions in a way that is accessible for the inherited culture of our choirs and appropriate to the context. Why should cathedrals be interested in exploring and engaging with the musicks of other worshipping traditions? What is their current practice? What are some possible developments?

## Introduction

The Archbishops' Commission on Racial Justice (ACRJ) is of the view that embracing the cultural expressions of people of GMH/UKME background within the life of the Church and its liturgy would help ensure that any gains made on racial justice are not fleeting but long-lasting (The Church of England 2023-4, 50).

Recent Church of England research, publications, and conference proceedings have found that racial injustices exist in liturgical spaces. They have recommended changes to cultural practice in order that the worship of the Church may better reflect the diversity of the Body of Christ. These findings and recommendations have as much relevance to 'quires and places where they sing' as they do to any other context in the Church of England (The Church of England 1968, 24). This paper offers a reading of those documents and proceedings with some reflections and possible outworkings of their findings and recommendations in such places. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer anything more than a first word on these matters, the author's hope is that it will stimulate much conversation about participation, diversity and inclusivity within the musical lives of our cathedral churches.

## From Lament to Action

In June 2020, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, the Church of England's House of Bishops identified that there was a need for 'significant cultural and structural change' within the Church of England to address matters of racial justice (The Church of England 2020). The following year, *From Lament to Action*, the report of the Archbishops' Anti-Racism Taskforce, highlighted the following modes of structural racism within the

church: 1) the presence of cultural barriers; 2) the presumption of cultural assimilation; and 3) the practice of cultural exclusion in the Church.

- 1) The report identified that ‘the culture of the Church of England acts as a barrier for full participation of UKME/GMH communities within the Church’. Indeed, ‘cultural barriers in worship and liturgical culture... act as disincentives to participation’ (The Church of England 2021, 55).
- 2) There being ‘little or no room for cultural expression outside of a predominant culture which is predominantly white and middle class’, ‘cultural assimilation’ is the presumed path to participation (ibid, 55).
- 3) Cultural exclusion is the established norm. There is little room for UKME/GMH communities to contribute the gifts of their own cultures to the cultural development and enrichment of the Church of England. This contrasts with an exploration of intercultural practice outside of the Church.

More widely in society, there has been an ongoing debate about integration, assimilation and the expectations upon UKME/GMH communities to abandon their own cultural heritage and current expression in favour of traditional host approaches. Outside of the Church of England, UKME/GMH communities have enriched and influenced culture in a way that has not been apparent in the Church, where there seems to be little if any room for cultural development or enrichment due to hierarchical structures where UKME/GMH people are absent (ibid, 55).

The report identified Culture and Liturgy as an important work stream (ibid, 55). This was subsequently specified in the Terms of Reference for the Archbishops’ Commission for Racial Justice (The Church of England 2022), the body tasked with setting out a compelling agenda for change.

### **Diverse People Inhabiting Praise**

On 11<sup>th</sup> January 2024, the Archbishops’ Commission on Racial Justice and the Church of England’s Liturgical Commission jointly hosted a conference called ‘Diverse People Inhabiting Praise’ in Church House, Westminster. Its purpose was to enable its participants to begin to consider how to identify and address racism in the liturgical cultures of the Church of England. I was in attendance and the following is a resume of the main points:

- 1) Liturgical spaces are not culturally neutral. They can be spaces of racial injustice in which there are seemingly immovable cultural barriers, an active presumption of cultural assimilation, and the unashamed practice of cultural exclusion. If these racially unjust practices are present, does this not contradict the very essence of worship? Is not worship a space of encounter with God and neighbour, and a space of being open to be changed by them? (Prentis 2024).
- 2) Liturgical cultures can be hypocritical. Concerning injustice in the life of ancient Israel, God spoke these words through the prophet Amos:

I can’t stand your religious meetings...  
I’ve had all I can take of your noisy ego-music.  
When was the last time you sang to me?

Do you know what I want?  
 I want justice—oceans of it.  
 I want fairness—rivers of it.  
 That's what I want. That's all I want. (Amos 5.21-24. Peterson 2002)

These words of judgement invite us to repentance. They expose the presence of injustice, reveal an alternative vision, and invite us to real repentance, to change. The range of meaning of the Greek word, *metanoia*, often translated as 'repentance', includes seeing things differently, changing your mind and changing your action (Danker 2000, 640-1).

- 3) Moses at the burning bush offers a narrative of *metanoia* for those seeking to repent in response to a judgement of racial injustice, and to embark on a journey of being open to others and making space for them. The extraordinary bush that burned but was not consumed by the fire interrupted Moses' habitual experience; he took time to investigate; and he was invited to see and act differently (Exodus 3.1-4.17. NRSV 1989).
- 4) Although there is no substitute for engaging with individuals and communities, exploring their cultures, and working out how to enable these people to belong in worship, compilations of liturgical resources from around the world provide another way of being open to the culture of others. One example is the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Prayer Cycle, which shares music, prayers and reflections compiled from member churches (Roberts, 2023-4, 52-4).
- 5) The conference closed with Lord Boateng making a passionate appeal for action. Liturgical spaces must embody the justice of God and at least begin to embody an answer to the prayer 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. He noted that, as regards making space for others, the Church of England has plenty of space to offer others, because its churches are empty.

These are challenging words for the Church of England to hear. They are especially challenging words for those of us who work in 'quires and places where they sing'. We rightly spend time and resources nurturing our unique choral tradition because it is considered a precious cultural jewel in the crown of liturgical worship. Yet it is not the only such jewel that we have been given. There are other jewels without which that crown is incomplete. Cathedrals should be interested in exploring and engaging with the musicks of other worshipping traditions not just because the Archbishops' Commission on Racial Justice consider that this is of strategic importance as regards tackling racism in the Church (The Church of England 2023-4, 50). They should be interested because they are the liturgical spaces in which the jewels of the whole people of God should find their place in the crown of liturgical worship.

### Examples of practice

Cathedrals are focal points for the mission and ministry of the bishop, symbolised by the presence of the *cathedra*. They are also described as being the mother church of the diocese. As such, they are the space into which the people of God are gathered for worship and then sent out in mission. Given that the people who are gathered for worship are culturally diverse, it follows that the liturgical space into which they are gathered should reflect that diversity in some way. Whilst cathedrals as distinctive local communities have

their own cultures which is rightly celebrated and will form a contribution to the gathering, at times the 'family hold back' principle is necessary to enable a true gathering of the people of God. This was the practice of Canterbury Cathedral during the Lambeth Conference, where the cathedral choir contributed as one of the jewels in the crown alongside an intercultural group of musicians that I curated.<sup>1</sup>

At Bradford Cathedral, room is being made in diocesan services for musicians and repertoire that reflect the culture of local churches and the wider Anglican Communion. Recent examples include a worship band and an Arabic-speaking Sudanese choir, and short liturgical songs; these have contributed alongside and sometimes in partnership with the cathedral choir (when it has been possible to research and arrange the music appropriately). Some of our choristers who come from different liturgical cultures have enjoyed and been affirmed by the presence of other cultural expressions in worship, even if it has not been their own culture. Similar intercultural practice is being explored in other cathedrals, notably Leicester.

It is, however, not straightforward, and not without its challenges. Like Moses at the burning bush, such intercultural work disrupts the musical status quo and requires *metanoia*, a process of change. Making room for others to belong means that the role of the cathedral choir changes. The process of finding and preparing such cultural jewels for worship takes time and care. Whilst there is a potential for informed performance practice to drift into cultural appropriation, there is also an opportunity for playful dialogue between cultures, embodying the nature of intercultural relationships.

Despite this, it is worthwhile and appropriate for cathedrals to explore such intercultural practice. We are here to curate worship, that dynamic relationship with God and neighbour, and our cultural traditions are sacred gifts to enable this, not sacred cows to be preserved. In the book of Revelation, the vision of heavenly worship includes the kings, and the glory and honour of the nations being brought into the new Jerusalem to take their place in the great intercultural assembly of every tribe, people and language (Revelation 21.24-6; 7.9). If we pray that it will be on earth as it is in heaven, then, however challenging, these are appropriate courses of action to ensure that all are enabled to belong, participate in, and contribute to the worship of their mother cathedral.

## Conclusion

The author hopes that this paper will encourage the cathedral music community to engage in a process of considering and responding to the recent findings and recommendations of the Church of England as regards racism in the life of the Church. Such a process will involve:

- paying attention to the established culture of a particular context;
- forming relationships with people of different cultural backgrounds, taking care to bear in mind that some of them might be on the edges of that community;

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<sup>1</sup> Recordings of the cathedral services of the Lambeth Conference 2022 are available via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcX4jxvQP7c&list=PLUANff\\_8ldgNT8AOKDdxFi7rRzPQgpwY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcX4jxvQP7c&list=PLUANff_8ldgNT8AOKDdxFi7rRzPQgpwY)

- engaging with such persons on their own terms, listening to their experiences, and making room for them to share any cultural jewels that they may wish to offer in worship;
- responding in a way that is mindful of their experiences, addressing any cultural barriers, expectations of cultural assimilation, and practices of cultural exclusion that may have been uncovered;
- working collaboratively with them and others to explore how their cultural jewels might be offered up in worship, and then making room for such co-production to happen.

Together, this could form the beginning of an ongoing process of true repentance, of being constantly open to see and act differently, of being attentive to the cultural jewels of our communities, and of making room for them to take their place the crown of liturgical worship, alongside the English Choral Tradition. Rather than seeing this as a threat, I see this as a potential space of creative flourishing. The history of the canon bears witness to the development of that repertoire through openness to the music of other cultures. I believe that an openness to the cultural jewels that are in our midst could pave the way to new horizons of choral flourishing, and to an even more glorious crown of liturgical worship.

***Possible questions for local reflection:***

- *Me.* Have you ever felt alienated in worship? When? Why? How might you cross that divide?
- *Them.* Which cultural voices are alienated from your liturgical space? What are the challenges and opportunities to include them?
- *Us.* What is your experience of seeking, welcoming and incorporating the jewels of other cultures? Where are there examples of good practice? Who are the composers and arrangers that have the relevant cultural and intercultural experience, and might be able to enable the musical collaboration of different cultures? How might the English Choral Tradition be further developed and enhanced through engaging in such intercultural dialogue?

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