

**A look at the British Church and society from a ‘third eye’
Jonathan Gichaara**

Jonathan Gichaara, a minister of the Methodist Church of Kenya and now working in Sheffield for five years, holds up a mirror to church and society in Britain.

‘And since you know you cannot see yourself, so well as by reflection, I, your glass will modestly discover to yourself, that of yourself which you yet know not of.’ – William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616).¹

Even though the above quote from Shakespeare comes with a bit of presumptuous tinge, in many ways it rings true. There are many ways in which we actually do not ‘see’ ourselves except through a mirror – and often other people are our mirrors.

A person from a different social cultural background looking at a ‘guest culture’ will be impacted by that culture in ways that the natives are not. She/ he will see things and hear things that pass as normal to the locals. In Shakespearean terms, the image of the ‘home’ church and society is in some ways more clearly reflected in the eyes of the visitor.

My family and I came to Sheffield, England in January 2003 as part of what the British Methodist Church call ‘mission partners’. Ours is a five year stint teaching at the Urban Theology Unit, pastoring two congregations and with a remit as a mission interpreter. Mission interpretation involves speaking engagements in different churches and other places on pertinent issues of the African church and society.

Arriving in Britain

Arriving at Heathrow Airport on a cold morning, December 30 2002, we were completely unprepared for the reception that the British immigration officials gave us. They portrayed a general perception that everyone coming from Africa and other parts of the world outside the EU must be a refugee or an asylum seeker. Their peering questions definitely told us that we were not welcome.

All non-European Union residents were huddled into a queue of their own and of course their passports were scrutinised to the point where you imagine somebody had told them that you were a cousin of Osama bin Laden! What was worse was that we were directed to a room where we were told curtly to undress. All clothes on the upper torso of the body were to be removed. For ladies who had long dresses, it meant removing them and wearing the aprons that were provided for a covering. We were to undergo an x-ray. No explanations given. Reading the officials’ mood, you clearly knew that if you refused to carry out instructions as

given you risked being sent back to where you had come from. All your journey plans and ticket going to waste. It was left to one's guess as to what they are looking for. It took me a long time to figure out that they would be looking for substances like cocaine. What if you had swallowed some of these illicit drugs and were only waiting to deposit them on the British soil? The other theory in my mind was that they were testing for certain communicable diseases e.g. Tuberculosis or HIV/AIDS. But the big question then remained; why would they think that it was only people from outside EU countries who were carriers of either these substances or diseases. Worse still, why wouldn't they have the decency to tell people what they were looking for and what they wanted to do with their bodies? Simply put, the British immigration treats non-European (read non-white) passport holders as less than human, much as they may make claim to the contrary.

The treatment by the immigration officials at Heathrow was in stark contrast to the ordinary British people. People are warm and welcoming, contrary to the popular notion that the British are cold and reserved. Of course the British will not be and need not be as exuberant as the Africans. This is a different social-cultural setting. And people must be allowed to be who they are.

The land of South Yorkshire

Cultural shock number one: All British people do not speak the same language, at least not the same dialect. We came to England expecting to hear what many of us in Kenya believe to be perfect Queen's English, which, so the story goes, is spoken in Oxford and Cambridge. That was not to be. In fact one person pointedly told us, 'We don't care to speak English here, we speak South Yorkshire!' Of course he was right. Nobody for example has time for long, winding sentences, like 'Do-you-want-a-cup-of-tea?' That sounds too mouthful. Why not just say; 'Wan' a cuppa?'

The South Yorkshire people are full of wit, jokes and wisdom all neatly parked together. They will for example say, 'It's what you learn after you know it all that really matters;' Or talking about money or lack of it, people will either tell you 'there is one good thing about being poor – it cost nowt'; or 'Honesty is the best poverty'.

We cannot do justice the South Yorkshire humour in this short paper. But I came across a funny title the other day which talks about the Sheffield of the 1940's and 50's, where the 'Sparrows Coughed'. This is coupled with the story of the teacher who asked a small girl what she was drawing; the girl replied; 'I'm drawing God.' The teacher said to the girl that no one knew what God looked like. The small girl replied, 'They will do when I've finished!'

It is a bit of a paradox that we find ourselves in ministry in picturesque Sheffield which stands on seven hills and at the intersection of the famous rivers Don and Sheaf. When I was growing up during the colonial days in the Meru village community of the foothills of Mt. Kenya, we used to get a lot of export products from Sheffield. Steel and cutlery products such as spoons, knives, forks, fork-

jembe, machetes (pangas), tins (ndebe's) and small engines all had the imprint of 'Made in Sheffield'.

Another uncanny snippet of history for us is that the place of birth of the proverbial John Wesley, Epworth, is barely 40 miles away from where we live. Wesley was a frequent visitor to Sheffield just as we are frequent visitors to Epworth. Indeed, the whole of South Yorkshire could in a sense be called 'John Wesley country'. A member of one of our congregations helps as a tour guide at the Epworth House museum.

The church in Britain

How about the church? One unnerving reality that hits a newcomer to the church in Britain, and especially the so-called mainline churches is the numerically low church membership and attendance. It is almost unheard of, for example, in Africa, that there could be a congregation of fewer than ten people and most of them in their seventies and eighties. Often people are reluctant to close such churches for the simple reason that they were either baptised in the building, married there or that their great grandfather/mother built it. It's quite a lesson into cultural history how tenaciously, the British holds to their traditions.

Statistics reveal that in sixty years (1940-2000), British Methodism closed 54% of its churches. In 2000 there were more seats than members in the Methodist churches in the ratio of three to one; and 46% of the churches in the same year had less than 30 members. To explicate the scenario further, in 2000 there were 6270 congregations, but by the year 2020 it is projected that the figure will reduce to 5000 congregations. From a church point of view, this does not make for comfortable reading.²

The large Anglican cathedrals and the towering spires of the Central Worship Halls of Methodism of the yester years serve only as a reminder of the glorious past of the church in Britain and indeed in Europe. There was a time when it was fashionable in England and elsewhere in Europe to go to church, but that situation no longer obtains. In the main, it is no longer socially correct to be 'too' religious to the point of going to church. No wonder, people are exploring with 'new ways of being church'.

Looking at the 'religious crisis' in Europe, one gets the idea that the dwindling numbers in church attendance are occasioned by a paradigm shift. Sociologically speaking, after a considerable period of time, societies experience what is called 'social anomie'. It is a time when a society gets 'tired' and is in need of 'renewal'. Old symbols lose their import and meaning and stand in need for a reconfiguration or a complete renewal. In social anomie, some people feel disorientated and anxious. Old traditions are questioned and often undermined. In essence, anomie is a state of 'normlessness' which results in a loss of fixed point of reference for norms and desires.³ My considered view is that the church and indeed the society in Europe may be experiencing social anomie and in need for a renewal.

The church that will be born out of a reconfigured and/or reconstituted society will in many respects be different from the old one, yet there is no way that it can completely divorce itself from the old one.

I think the second situation that is facing the church is in a sense related to the first. It is what I have called 'lack of confidence', or better still 'crisis of confidence'. During the time of John Wesley, the Methodist Church was very convinced of the things that were to be believed and preached about. Wesley taught the *Four All's of Methodism* – All need to be saved; All may be saved; All may know themselves saved; All may be saved to the utmost.⁴ In my opinion this kind of theology is no longer popular in British Methodism, except of course among some 'renegade' ministers and church members. Most of the others are genteel men and women who you are best advised not to unsettle with 'evangelical tirades'. In that sense, the church has come to represent a comfortable middle class. The pervading under current is a reversal of the old dictum that the gospel is for 'comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable'. The gospel now seems to 'comfort the already comfortable, while leaving the disturbed to lick their wounds'.

The above observations could be misconstrued to mean that one does not see any hope in the British and/or the church in Europe. This is not however the case. There are flickers of hope which will probably be the raw material upon which God will re-build the church in this part of the world. Certain fringe communities are still clinging to the hope of a new day when God will, so to speak, restore the lost religious fortunes of yester years. The 'Easter People' within the Methodist Church may not be a very popular movement in the main, but my considered view is that they generally represent God's flickers of hope in an environment that has steadily become secularised.

The other group who represent this flicker of hope are the migrant communities. Whereas in my conservative estimates, less than 1% of the indigenous British people go to church, the immigrant communities are seen to be very zealous about their faith. In fact some of the fastest growing churches in this country belong to the immigrants, especially those from West Africa. In one of the Methodist churches where I minister, we have a French-speaking African congregation drawn mainly from the Central African Republic, the DRC, Gabon and the Republic of Congo. They usually meet on Saturday and Sunday afternoons for prayer, fellowship and worship. This would be in stark contrast to most mainline congregations which usually meet only on Sunday morning for one hour worship.

All the observations made above, as far as the church is concerned, can be summed up as emanating from an eroded spiritual depth. Lack of spiritual depth can in turn be traced from an absence or inadequate fellowship with God – in essence a lack of devotional life. Whereas the church should and must be involved in social programmes, these only come as a result of and in obedience to a God who is concerned about the 'other'. But to invert the order so that the chore

business of the church becomes 'dispensing charity' is to put the cart before the horse.

It is often said that the 'family that prays together, stays together'. This seemingly simplistic statement could apply to the church. The church will be effective in its mission with and for God if it learned to first and foremost seek close fellowship with God. The young people in the British Methodist Church have already challenged the conference to make the year 2005/6 a 'year of prayer'. And the conference has done well to listen to the young people. This calls to memory the scripture that says 'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise...' (*Psalm 8.2*)

John Wesley once said that true spirituality (inward religion) consisted of bible reading, prayer and fellowship. Neil Richardson, the former President of the Methodist Conference (2003/4) did well to add to Wesley's list 'the social dimension' or what he called the 'outer religion'.⁵ This avoids a form of over-spiritualised Christianity which is so heavenly minded that it is of no earthly good. The church must hold in tension prayer, repentance and devotion on the one hand and social action on the other. Social action in the context of Britain will include issues of racial justice, and race equality, asylum, refugee and immigrant issues. I mention the above because in certain fundamental ways, the essence of the gospel has to do with the way we treat the neighbour and the stranger. In scriptural imagery, 'true spirituality' will depend on how we relate with the least, the lost and the last.

Learning from the church in Britain

There are many things though that the churches of the Two-Thirds World can borrow from the British church. I think the first of these is its ecumenical spirit. Either because of the dwindling numbers or due to the forces of secularism that are impacting on the church on this part of the world, there is a high degree of realism, fellowship and a willingness to work together among the different denominations. Somebody once said, 'We must learn to live together as brothers and sisters or we all perish together as fools'. The Anglican, Methodist, United Reformed and quite often the Baptists are coming together in the U.K. to work together cooperatively.

This, as many of us are aware, has resulted in the signing of the covenantal relationship between the Anglicans and Methodists. These relationships of co-operation between churches are not without their own challenges and contradictions. Our own Sheffield Inner City Ecumenical Mission (SICEM), which comprises the Methodist, URC, an un-denominational and a non-denominational church has experienced a serious set back after 30 years of working together. Some of the SICEM units decided to withdraw. Be that as it may, ecumenism on the whole is working well in quite a number of churches and ought to be upheld and emulated as good practice by churches in other parts of the world.

Another aspect of good practice which churches in Africa, Asia and elsewhere can borrow from the British churches has to do with affirmation of women in leadership. We are aware that there is still a long way to go even in the British churches really to put women and men on equal footing as far as church leadership is concerned. Indeed it is true that there are churches, especially within the Church of England, that will not accept women as their priests let alone as Bishops. But at least from what one observes in British Methodism, in the last two years the immediate two vice-presidents of conference have been women. The Methodist conference can also pride itself as having had a woman occupying the Wesleyan chair in the past. Be that as it may, there are other people who argue that this is mere 'tokenism'. They point out that numerically women far outnumber men in church membership and therefore this numerical strength should be reflected in church leadership. Whereas I think there is credence to the argument, British Methodism may not have done so badly after all. Most of the churches of Africa and Asia have not even begun to think about the possibility of voting a woman in any significant church leadership role. Yet paradoxically, as in the case of Britain, women far outnumber men in church membership in these Two-Thirds world countries.

The last thing, perhaps not the least that one could mention in the way of good practice as far as the British Church and society is concerned is the peaceful co-existence between different religious and ethnic communities. I am aware that this has not always been the case. For example, in August 1980 during my first visit to Britain to attend a World Methodist Youth Conference, we were caught in the middle of race riots between black youth, white youth and the police in Brixton. In fact at one point, a group of white youth confronted our Kenyan delegation as we went about our business. They thought we were part of the 'warring' group.

When compared with many other countries however, and taking into account the many and diverse ethno-cultural and religious communities in Britain. I think the country has done pretty well. One has only to think of Nigerian religious riots, killings and burning of property or the Eastern European ethnic cleansing problems to appreciate that there are, on the whole, good race relations here. In our part of Sheffield, in 2003 we held a peaceful religious procession over Easter weekend with our Muslim, Hindu brothers and sisters and all shades of Christian denominations. We called it 'march for peace' to protest against a then looming war in Iraq and to emphasise our solidarity as religious groups.

In December of the same year, the local Christians were invited to the nearby mosque to celebrate both Eid and Christmas. I think religious groups in other countries would do well to look to British for good practice in this aspect of peaceful co-existence.

It does not however make for very comfortable reading when news is flashed on our TV screens showing instances where police confront a black or an Asian youth and search him arbitrarily. One cannot help reading racist bias in those cases and

people of good will are better advised not to be complacent. It will do us a lot of good if we all confronted our own demons of racial bias which are often manifest in very unsuspecting ways. Racism is not the preserve of the dominant group only. Racial bigots are found among every racial class. Even for those of us who are OK, so to speak, we have our own moments and doses of racial biases. You only need to think of the first reaction of a mother whose daughter comes home and declares that she is in love with someone of a different racial group! The mother might acquiesce to her daughter's entreaties, but not without some persuasion.

In a mirror

And so then back to Shakespearean wisdom, one cannot see oneself clearly except by reflection. What we have attempted to do is to briefly look at the British socio-religious dynamics from an outsider's vintage point. And we have argued that there are things and certain practices that others could emulate as good practices while, in our view, there are others that portray the great British society in bad light.

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¹ *Julius Caesar*, Act 1, Scene 2, 1. 67-70. Cassius telling Brutus, he can, like a mirror ('glass') reveal discreetly ('modestly discover') what Brutus fails to understand about himself.

² The Methodist Church Resourcing Mission Office, *Decennial Statistical Returns for Methodist Chapels* (as at 31st December 2000); (The Methodist Church, 25 Marylebone Rd., London)

³ For a discussion on anomie see: Giddens, A. (2001) *Sociology 4th Edition*; Polity Press p.207-208. Also: Haralambos, M. and Holborn, Martin (2000) *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*; 5th Edition Harper Collins Publishers p.354-356.

⁴ *Called by Name: Being a member in the Methodist Church*. Methodist Publishing House; 2002 Peterborough; p.8

See also: <http://www.sitefx.co.U.K./mahon/BELIEFS.SHTML>

⁵ Methodist Recorder 15th January 2004 p.24. Published by the Methodist Newspaper Co. Ltd. London.