

On the vine

Reflections on Racism and the Church: An initial response to 'From Lament to Action'

Bishop's Adviser on Minority Ethnic Concerns, the Revd Rachma Abbott writes:

The report has 5 priority areas for action: Participation, Education, Training and Mentoring; Young People; Structures and Governance. I'm focussing today on participation.

"Racism in society and the church tends to be deeply entrenched, it is often unrecognised, and yet it is a very sensitive issue. It is so for both majority ethnic and minority ethnic people. It often takes people into difficult and complex situations, and when racism is acknowledged, it makes people feel uncomfortable and even guilty. Such recognition, however, may well be the first stage towards redress, for prejudice tends to lurk at the very centre of our humanity, and even in the Christian Church. In order to address this matter realistically, some educational work needs to be done by *all* concerned."

This quote is not from the Archbishops' Anti-Racism Taskforce report '*From Lament to Action*' published a week ago.

This quote is not from the Government's Report from *Commission on Racism and Ethnic Disparities* report published a month ago.

This quote is not from the Panorama television programme "*Is the Church Racist?*" presented by Clive Myrie.

This quote is not even from the *Commission on Racial Inclusivity in the Jewish Community* – a report I couldn't resist mentioning. (Declaration of interest: I am the mother of the Report's author, Stephen Bush.)

So where is this quote from? It's from one of the first study groups I remember participating in - I might even have led one of the sessions as I was training for Reader (LLM) ministry at the time. This quote is from the Study pack '**Seeds of Hope in the Parish**', published in 1996 following on from the 1991 report 'Seeds of Hope'.

I recognised the cover of this report and many of the other books and reports on screen during the Panorama programme. Seeing this report and realising how long ago it was and how little seemed to have changed I was filled with Lament, the prophetic lament that holds both sorrow and anger in response to injustice and the failure of the body of the church to be transformed into Christ's glorious body:

How long, O Lord, how long?

I know, I know, many people within the body of Christ's church are wearied by the last twelve months; by the unending demands of the pandemic's ever-changing regulations; by new legislation relating to marriages; by financial pressures and demands in and beyond our churches; by deanery plans and by the need to respond to Living in Love and Faith; by our own losses and fears.

So, when I and my minority ethnic colleagues say 'How long, O Lord, how long?', some will hear that and be wanting to say:

How much, O Lord, how much? How much more are you asking us to take on board? How can we make bricks without straw? How can we feed all these people with a few loaves and a couple of fishes, especially now we're being asked to think about the vegetarians and the gluten intolerant as well?

The fullest possible participation of the most diverse range of people matters – it is part of the joyous promise of Pentecost and our missional calling to share the good news with all the world.

I'm going to tell you a story about a young woman, a single mum, who was baptised with her son when he was two months old. This young woman was very fortunate in that the church she joined was a diverse community: people from different backgrounds, ethnicities, lives and theologies so feeling belonging among them was easy. The first time that woman was invited to participate in the life of her church it was to read from the Bible, then to share in the Sunday school work, the deanery synod, the local social responsibility group and so on.

Even so, the first time her parish priest suggested ordained ministry she laughed and said: Women like me don't do that sort of thing. That woman was blessed as her journey continued that the persistence in encouraging her was informed by people who had done some thinking in the lines of that in the Seeds of Hope study pack. She was blessed that her vicar had a Romany Traveller heritage, that her Bishop was black and among those she explored going forward for ministry there were men and women from different backgrounds, ethnicities, lives, and theologies.

Without that encouragement to participate from the very beginning, I do not believe I would have been ordained.

I am thankful for the encouragement of my current Bishop to take up this role as his Adviser on Minority Ethnic Concerns, and for the encouragement of the other clergy in this Diocese.

I hope that those who are coming to the Clergy Day, whether you have been part of that group or not, might be willing to share a lunch table and to reflect together further.

When I look at my rural villages carefully, I know that there is diversity within them and I'm guessing yours will be the same. In one of those churches, the local military base means that we are blessed with people from Fiji, Ghana and people from British minority communities worshipping among us.

The figures from the Church of England quoted in the report From Lament to Action show that 15% of those worshipping in the Church of England are from UK Minority Ethnic or Global Majority Heritage communities. That should encourage us because, from the last census figures, 86% of the total population identify as White British, so that 15% is the same as all the other groupings added together (which will include people from the EU and other white UKME groups such as Traveller communities). I know that I do not look at PCCs or ministers, whether lay or ordained, and see that

diversity of people – that diversity we see at Pentecost and throughout Acts in our Scriptures reflected elsewhere.

For those of us for whom the lament of ‘how long O Lord, how long’ has been going on within the church for over 40 years, participation will need to be encouraged with the persistence of majority ethnic church members and leaders. Or we will not believe that your welcome of this report will lead to any more meaningful action than has happened in the past.

The widest possible participation of the greatest diversity of Christians is both a biblical image of the Kingdom of God and necessary for the fullest flourishing of the church. The time to act has passed, but the time to act is also now.

Otherwise, as with those who arrived as part of the Windrush generation – many of whom were Anglican Christians when they arrived in the UK – within a few short years they will be leaving us to lead and worship in other Christian churches and fellowships.

Please, I beg you hear the cry of those who say ‘How long, O Lord, how long?’



BLESS YOU MY SON: Reverend Rachma Bush who was ordained as a priest and her 15-year-old son Kizi

Single mum is ordained

by JESSICA SMITH
jessica.smith@archant.co.uk

RACHMA Bush, who was ordained as a priest on Sunday, has described how single motherhood led her to her faith.

The Reverend Bush was an atheist until her struggle to cope with raising son, Kizi, alone brought her into the church.

She was ordained by Bishop Oliver at St Matthew's Church, Bethnal Green on Sunday.

"God called me," she said. "After being convinced he had the wrong number I finally got around to answering."

"People in the church also help you understand whether what you are hearing is right. We all came to the decision together."

Born in London, Rachma then moved to South Africa where her parents were from. Under the apartheid regime, they were not allowed to marry as her mother was white and her father 'Asian-looking'. She said: "Being an unmarried mother runs in the family!"

When Kizi, now 15, was born, Rachma was not happy with her single parent status. She said: "I had got myself into a bit of a mess, but I now see I was blessed because of my son. And if all my mistakes had been as wonderful as Kizi I would be very lucky."

Rachma and Kizi were baptised together when he

was a baby. She then worked as a reader at St Mary's Church in Bow. She said: "I've always been good at yacking, it's one of my gifts."

Wanting to learn more about her faith, she gave up her job in student service at the University of the Arts to study Theology and Ministry at the University of Durham. After serving one year as a deacon, Bishop Stephen Oliver asked her to come to Stepney.

Rachma feels very privileged in her new role, as she has important responsibilities advising people on marriage or confirmation, and helping people who have been bereaved.

However, she would like to see the church getting more involved in major social issues, such as G8. She said: "Things are changing in the church, the admission of women to the priesthood being one example, but it is still behind the times."

"The anti-slavery movement started in the church: I want to see the church leading the calling to social justice again, to be how it was when it was helping to set up schools in the East End."

Although Kizi is now an atheist and no longer attends church, Rachma says he is very supportive of her work.

"He doesn't believe in what I'm doing," she said, "but thinks I am doing a good job."

Parish Priest Kevin Scully, who has known Rachma for eight years and will be overseeing her training, said: "Rachma is a very gifted person and very well loved."