Intercultural Church: Many voices, one song

A conversation and theological reflection with Bishop Saju of Leicester

What might it mean for the Church of England to become more intercultural? Not simply a Church in which people from different cultures are present, but one in which encounter across difference changes the shared life of the Church: who leads, who listens, whose theology is heard, and what is created together.

In a conversation exploring the theology of intercultural church, Bishop Saju reflected on cultural difference, the presence of Christ in one another, mission as both giving and receiving, and the distinction between being multicultural and intercultural.

At the heart of his reflection is a conviction that intercultural church is not primarily about ethnicity or racial diversity. It is about what it means to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ in a culturally diverse world. That includes ethnicity, but also class, generation and the many different cultures present within England.

Many voices and one song: God and diversity

For Bishop Saju, a theology of intercultural church begins not with the contemporary diversity of England, but with creation itself.

Bishop Saju: God creates a world that is incredibly diverse. And the reality is God loves that multiplicity in creation, multiplicity in human beings. And so for me, all theology, at the very least, has to start with this creative God who is a releaser of diversity.

This movement continues throughout Scripture. God's call of Abram is a calling towards blessing "all nations"; the prophetic imagination looks towards a "house of prayer for all nations"; and Jesus sends his disciples to make disciples of "all nations." Pentecost is particularly important because its picture of Christian unity does not depend upon eliminating difference.

Bishop Saju: Pentecost is not an abolishing of languages. Pentecost is not the Spirit giving one accent. The miracle of Pentecost is in people hearing the mighty works of God in the languages that form them. And therefore, Christian unity is not sameness. It is a communion across difference created by the Spirit, centred on Jesus Christ. The biblical picture is therefore one of "many voices and one song." The gospel does not flatten culture, nor does culture replace the gospel. Christ gathers the nations without erasing their voices.

This also means resisting the temptation to romanticise cultural difference. No culture simply embodies the gospel.

Bishop Saju: Every culture has gifts that can be received, wounds that need healing, idols that demand exposure, and possibilities that can be redeemed. And that is true of every culture: my own Indian culture, British culture, Anglican culture, the professional church culture.

Difference belongs to God's creative abundance, while every culture remains open to judgement, reconciliation and transformation.

Expecting Christ to meet us through one another

What changes when the Church expects not simply to bring Christ to others, but to encounter Christ through them?

Bishop Saju illustrates the challenge through the story of a giraffe who builds his dream home. The house is perfectly designed for giraffes: high doors, soaring ceilings and everything exactly where a giraffe would need it. When his friend the elephant visits, however, the elephant struggles to fit through the door and breaks the staircase under his weight.

The giraffe's solution is to suggest that the elephant change himself: slim down, take up aerobics, perhaps even ballet. But, as the elephant observes, a house designed for a giraffe will never really work for an elephant unless there are some major changes. The story raises some challenging questions for the Church.

Bishop Saju: How much of our church's welcome amounts to inviting elephants into the house designed entirely for the giraffes? That leads to further questions: Who designed the worship? Who determines what good leadership sounds like? Whose theological education is treated as normative? Who is invited to participate but not trusted to reshape the room? Who must continually translate themselves? Whose prayers, music and stories are at the centre?

Intercultural encounter begins with the recognition that "Christ was here before our arrival."

Bishop Saju: I don't simply bring Christ to a culturally different other. I expect Christ to meet, question and enlarge me through them. Renewal begins when people are not merely welcomed into our houses, but entrusted with reshaping it. Renewal is relational, it's contextual, it's adaptive, and it's not really template-based.

This makes intercultural church more than welcome or inclusion. The question is not simply whether somebody can enter the existing house, but whether they are trusted to help reshape it.

The long work of becoming intercultural

There is no simple template or formula for becoming more intercultural. Bishop Saju is clear that intercultural transformation is "long haul work."

Bishop Saju: Real transformation does take time.

Rather than offering a programme, he identifies five practices that every disciple and every church can begin to embody: **bless, practise hospitality, listen, learn and be sent.**

To bless means asking what it would mean for a church to bless its parish and its neighbours rather than approaching church primarily as something to consume.

Bishop Saju: Sometimes we come into our churches and saying, *"What can this product called the Church do for me?"* And I think it is almost a transformation, a repentance really, to say we are not here for consuming in our individual society. We are here to actually bless the nations, to bless our parish as well.

Hospitality means more than welcoming people into a church building. It asks whom Christians eat and drink with, particularly whether they make space at the table for the stranger and for people who are culturally different from themselves.

Listening means paying attention to the people already around us. To listen to the voices of those in our communities.

Bishop Saju: We don't have to go to Mombasa or to Rio or to Bangalore to explore culture. For many of us, we just need to go across our street.

That *listening* must include ethnic diversity, but also other cultural differences across Britain including different socio-economic backgrounds. The Church must listen deeply to the longings of people from all backgrounds as well as recognising the gifts, wounds and possibilities within each culture.

Listening is accompanied by learning. To be a disciple is to be someone willing to listen and learn.

Finally, Christians are called to understand themselves as people who are sent.

Bishop Saju: What does it mean for us to be sent people in our parks, in our schools, in our universities, in our workplaces, in our NHS, wherever God has placed us? Let's see ourselves as sent.

Practised over time, these ordinary habits have the capacity to form a church that reflects God's heart. Becoming more intercultural, Bishop Saju suggests, is ultimately about becoming "more human."

Bishop Saju: We bless, we eat, we listen, we learn, and we see ourselves as sent people. And doing that over a period of time actually has the capacity to see a church that I think reflects God's heart.

Mission as receiving as well as giving

Intercultural church also challenges assumptions about where theological and missional wisdom comes from.

Bishop Saju: The gravity of world Christianity has shifted. But parts of the Church of England still behave as though theological wisdom is produced in Europe and North America and exported elsewhere. The cultural translation of Christianity belongs to the character of the faith itself. The gospel takes local flesh while retaining its capacity to judge and transform every locality. Christians from African, Asian, Caribbean and Latin American contexts are therefore not simply bringing greater cultural diversity into British churches. They are theologians. They are evangelists. They are witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, whose Scripture may disclose aspects of Christ that the British church has forgotten or never learned to see in the first place.

Bishop Saju sees this already happening in Leicester, where churches have become culturally diverse not necessarily because they began intercultural programmes, but because people have arrived and joined them.

For him, the movement of people raises a theological possibility: "God might be up to something."

The question becomes not simply what newcomers might receive from the Church of England, but what renewal they might bring to it.

> **" Mission is participating with God in what God is already doing. We arrive as witnesses, but also as guests and hosts and learners and teachers, and therefore our cultures must receive theology, mission and spiritual wisdom from growing churches."**
>
> *Bishop Saju*

The beauty and difficulty of a shared life

This process is not romantic or easy. Bishop Saju's own previous experience as vicar of a culturally diverse church illustrates both its promise and its cost.

The congregation had become increasingly culturally diverse, yet worship leadership, governance and other aspects of church leadership remained overwhelmingly monocultural. Intentional steps were taken to change this: placing people from global-majority heritage in areas such as governance, safeguarding, finances and buildings, and creating opportunities for new people to lead worship and take responsibility.

While the church had brought in Bishop Saju to help make the church more intercultural, the changes brought challenges. Some of the people who had wanted the church to become more diverse eventually left.

Bishop Saju: One person turned to me and said, "Saju, we like you, but all of this inclusion is making us feel very excluded." A working-class white man, a Nigerian matriarch, a Pakistani person, a young person and somebody with learning difficulties working together: it's messy. It's hard work. I don't want anybody reading this thinking this is easy.

Yet difficulty is not an argument against intercultural church.

Bishop Saju: I think it's beautiful. I genuinely believe this is God's desire. The easier path is to put all the Pakistanis in one pocket, the Indians in one pocket, and the English in one pocket, and be multicultural in that sense. It doesn't mean there is no conflict, but you come to a place of understanding where people are coming from.

"For the follower of Jesus Christ, what Apostle Paul calls this is a gospel of reconciliation. This is not just an added extra. This gospel is a gospel of reconciliation."

Bishop Saju

Part of doing this work well is learning to recognise one's own culture. We easily assume that our own way of doing things is simply *the* way things are done. Knowing our own culture allows us both to love what is good within it and recognise where our assumptions differ from those of others.

Different cultural worldviews will sometimes converge and sometimes clash. Intercultural church therefore requires humility and a willingness to remain within the discomfort of difference.

The gospel itself, Bishop Saju argues, calls the Church into this difficult work.

From multicultural presence to intercultural transformation

The distinction between multicultural and intercultural church is therefore significant.

Multiculturalism describes an existing reality that we are already existing in.

Bishop Saju: Multiculture is different cultures occupying the same space where everybody might be welcomed. Cultural events are celebrated, minority communities are visible, but power, theology, worship and decision-making largely remain unchanged.

Being an intercultural church asks a different set of questions.

Bishop Saju: Who shapes the shared life? Who leads? Who listens? Who changes? Who accesses the centre? And what is being created together that none of us can create alone?

If multiculturalism tells us who is in the room, interculturalism asks what happens because those people are in the room together.

Bishop Saju: Multicultural presence can leave the house unchanged. Intercultural encounter rearranges the furniture and sometimes rebuilds a new house. Multicultural tells us who's in the room. It's just a noun, if you like. And intercultural is the verb. Christian community therefore calls people beyond coexistence towards encounter, exchange, shared leadership and mutual transformation, without requiring cultural difference to disappear.

And that vision extends beyond ethnicity.

Bishop Saju: Intercultural is thought of as ethnic racial work. That is not what is in my vision and my heart. What's in my heart is: what does it mean for us to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ in our times? And that means every culture in this country. That is the difference between racial justice work and intercultural work.

An intercultural Church takes seriously the cultures of people of different socio-economic backgrounds as well as ethnic cultures. It recognises gifts within those cultures and listens when people feel unseen or unheard.

Intercultural work is therefore a practice of humility, learning and unlearning. It is not a programme added to the Church's mission. It is a way of asking what kind of Church God may be calling into being through encounter with one another.

> **"The challenge is not simply to create a more diverse Church, but to allow that diversity to change the Church itself: many languages, one gospel; many voices and one song.**

Key takeaways

- **Cultural difference belongs to God's creative abundance:** Christian unity is not sameness. Pentecost offers a vision of unity in which different languages and voices are not erased.
- **Every culture both gives and receives:** Every culture brings gifts that can be received, wounds that need healing, idols that demand exposure and possibilities that can be redeemed.
- **Welcome is not enough:** Intercultural renewal begins when people are not merely welcomed into an existing church culture but are entrusted with helping to reshape its shared life.
- **Intercultural transformation is long-haul work:** Blessing, practising hospitality and eating together, listening, learning and understanding ourselves as sent people are practices through which churches can grow into a more genuinely shared life.

- **Mission requires receiving as well as giving:** Christians from across the world are theologians, evangelists and witnesses from whom the Church in England can receive theology, mission and spiritual wisdom.
- **Intercultural church is difficult as well as beautiful:** Cultural difference can create discomfort, conflict and loss. The gospel of reconciliation calls Christians to remain in that difficult work together.
- **Multicultural describes presence; intercultural describes encounter:** Multiculturalism can leave power, worship, theology and decision-making unchanged. Intercultural church asks who shapes the shared life and what can be created together that none could create alone.
- **Intercultural is bigger than ethnicity:** It encompasses the different ethnic, class, generational and other cultures present within England and asks what it means for all of them to encounter, listen to and learn from one another.

Our Calling

This prayer draws together much of the vision explored in this conversation: the restoration of all things in Christ and the bringing together of the families of the nations.

Our calling, then, is not simply to welcome difference, but to be changed through encounter with one another. Intercultural Church asks us to listen, learn, give and receive, trusting that Christ is already at work beyond what is familiar to us. It is long and sometimes difficult work, but it calls us towards a deeper shared life, in which difference is neither erased nor simply accommodated, but becomes part of how we learn to live as a reconciled people in Christ.

"Almighty Father, who will restore all things in your beloved Son, Jesus, the King of all, govern the hearts and minds of those in authority and bring the families of the nations, divided and torn apart by the ravages of sin, to be subject to his just and gentle rule, who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen."

Bishop Saju