WE REALLY NEED TO TALK ABOUT RACE

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Category: Observations

In the light of recent events in the United States, I'm taking the unusual step of reposting something that I wrote less than a year ago. I considered writing something new in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, but I decided not to, partly because it would take more time than I have available today, but also because I wanted to avoid giving the impression that the UK is aloof from these issues. However, those of us who advocate for minority/hidden/unreached people groups must not stand indifferent to the plight of minority groups in our own societies; to do so is hypocrisy of the worst sort.

Having been involved in minority language Bible translation for most of my adult life, I have long been interested and concerned about those who, from a Western perspective, appear to be on the margins of the church. In an African context, Iâ€™ve found myself advocating for the cause or minority language speakers who are dominated and excluded by those who use languages of wider communication or European/colonial languages. However, while Iâ€™ve advocated for and written about the global/multicultural/multiethnic/multilingual nature of the church, Iâ€™ve never given much thought to how this should work out in the UK context. I accepted the fact that in many big cities churches are effectively segregated by race, with black-majority churches meeting in city-centres and majority-white churches in the suburbs. Reading We Need To Talk About Race: Understanding the Black Experience in White Majority Churches changed my thinking. This is a very good book, indeed.

It is a normal format paperback of 186 pages with a short bibliography and about ten pages of end-notes. Although there are references to scholarly works, the style is popular and easily accessible and there are discussion questions at the end of each chapter for those who want to reflect more deeply, or perhaps use the book in a group session. The book will set you back around Â£6 and there is a Kindle version available if you prefer reading in that format.

The author, Ben Linsay, is a pastor at Emmanuel Church in London, which is predominantly white, while he himself is black. This experience both informs the book and gives it a degree of authority which is hard to gainsay.

The opening of the book sets the tone:

> *Being black in a white majority church can be a bit like the first day of a new school on repeat. Your natural insecurities come to the surface. Will I be included? Will I be noticed? How do I connect with the popular people? How do I fit in? Will my contributions be valued? Conversations feel like hard work and at times even painful without the ease of shared*

> *histories and friendships.*

Now, at this point, it is easy for the white reader to get defensive; â€œitâ€™s not like that in my churchâ€ , â€œI know black people who are perfectly at easeâ€ â€¦ That is to miss the point. We need to listen to the voices of BAME Christians and to allow them to speak for themselves and not explain away their experiences.

This book does a great job of allowing black Christians to speak about their lives. The authorâ€™s own experiences are interspersed with quotes from literature and songs. There are also interviews and testimonies from other Christians about their experiences. All of this adds up to make the case that Black Christians are often not made to feel comfortable or at home in white churches; this is not something that we can sweep under the carpet.

However, the case is made that this is exactly what we do: we sweep issues of race and black experience under the carpet and donâ€™t even mention them. A clear contrast is made between black-majority churches which address issues of injustice and the pain that they cause and white churches who tend not to mention them.

The final two chapters make some suggestions as to a way forward.

Make no mistake, this is an important book. Who should read it? I suspect that most people who lead multi-ethnic churches have read it already, but if not, they should. I would also suggest that in those contexts it would make an excellent resource for small groups. Those who are involved in leading churches which are predominantly (or entirely) white MUST read it. In multi-cultural Britain, something is wrong if your church does not reflect the make up of your community.

For more on a similar theme, I would strongly recommend Turning the Tables on Mission: Stories of Christians from the Global South in the UK which I reviewed here.

To close, I found this quote particularly challenging for those of us involved in global mission:

> *As a black person, I struggle with the continued fascination with and fetishization of black children in Africa, but the lack of interest in black children suffering in the UK.*

Let me add one final comment; I don't care how "sound" you are on issues like the atonement or the inspiration of Scripture, if you haven't addressed issues of racial inequality in your Christian teaching, then you haven't fully understood what the Gospel is all about.