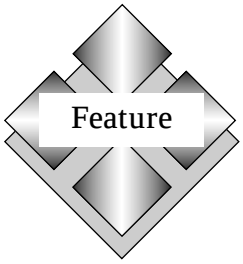
Journeying Without a Map: The Christian Education of Black Children and Young People



by
Anthony Reddie

Among the many churches in Britain, much time and effort has been spent in the practice of Christian education, particularly in its application to young people and children. A great deal of research has been undertaken by academics and other interested parties, looking at the necessity of Christian education amongst faith communities, the rationale behind this discipline and the educational development of these young recipients.

The development of new techniques for the dissemination of information and knowledge, in conjunction with new learning materials and resources, has appeared to take place on a wholly generic basis. Less emphasis has seemingly been placed upon the cultural factors and differing identities that may exist and have an impact upon the individual's response to the material and the methods employed in their learning and development.

The project I am presently engaged in is called The Birmingham Initiative. The BI is a Methodist-inspired and -funded research project that is seeking to address some of the oversights I have alluded to in the previous paragraph. The project was founded upon the vision of the then General Secretary of the Methodist Division of Education and Youth, Revd Christopher Hughes Smith.

It has been widely recognised, albeit at an informal and anecdotal level, that the present materials (and methods) on which a great deal of the Christian education work with children and young people is based is at best inappropriate for use with black, African Caribbean children. I say 'at best', for in many respects these materials and approaches can be more detrimental to the affective development of black children than simply being seen as 'inappropriate'.

If one is going to take the Christian education and nurture of black children seriously, one needs to be aware of the distinct nature of black culture, history, spirituality and the myriad identities which are inhabited by and imposed upon black people, and which have a crucial role in their development.

In order for any pedagogy of Christian education with reference to black children and young people to be effective, it must be cognizant of the experiences and socio-cultural forces that have both shaped and given substance to what is the 'African' understanding of the Christian faith. In his book Decolonising Theology, Noel Erskine writes: 'A crucial aspect of black people's self understanding is a great need to understand their world. In order for them to understand themselves better, they must look at the world from which they came and be willing to let their past world dialogue with their present world.'[1]

The Birmingham Initiative is attempting to place the cultural backgrounds of black children and young people directly to the fore and to investigate ways in which new materials and methods can assist such children to develop Christian faith in terms that are consistent with and informed by their cultural heritage. Although it is inspired and funded by the Methodist Church, the project has an ecumenical base, in that the Management Committee includes members from other Christian denominations, and works amongst inner city churches wider than those which are identified as being Methodist. I am presently in contact with some twenty-six churches, which include Anglican, Baptist and United Reformed churches, across the many inner city areas of Birmingham.

My first six months or so in post were spent travelling around many of these inner city churches where black children and young people form a disproportionately high percentage of those who attend Junior Church on most Sunday mornings. These many visits and an accompanying telephone questionnaire revealed a number of fascinating points.

First, the decision to centre the work on inner city churches was somewhat vindicated when

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the survey revealed that, in the twenty or so churches included in the pilot study, black children constituted 80.73% of all children attending Junior Church on Sunday morning. Further analysis of the data revealed that 35% of such inner city churches were entirely black, and that 95% of these churches found their Sunday morning children's work inhabited by a majority of black individuals. (The majority in this case was 65% and above of the total number of children attending on a Sunday morning.) In effect, one can conclusively document and plot the numerical ascendancy of black children and young people in inner city churches.

What emerged, also, from the quantitative survey was the clear necessity for a new type of Christian education material geared directly towards the affective, cultural needs of black children and young people:

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- A contextualised approach that recognises the rich and distinct cultures and experiences that have shaped the lives of black people for centuries, and have given rise to a particular expression of Christian faith.
- An approach that cherishes and recognises the uniqueness of black people of the African diaspora, and affirms their place within the Kingdom of God. To recognise, in the words of Marcus Garvey, that 'God made us as part of His creation. He made no mistake when he made us black with kinky hair. It was Divine Purpose for us to live in our own habitat... Forget the white man's banter, that He made us in the night and forgot to paint us white.'[2]

There exists a wealth of literature pertaining to the Christian education of black children and young people, the vast majority of which is in the United States of America (where, incidentally, the first work pertaining to the importance of a contextualised Christian pedagogy for black people was undertaken in 1966!). In the many writings of such luminaries as Grant S Shockley, Olivia Pearl Stokes, Ella P Mitchell and Anne Streatly Wimberly, to name but a few, there has been a clear, consistent call for the practice and theory of Christian education within the Church to be linked to the concrete realities that affect black people.

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Grant Shockley amplifies this contention when he writes: 'Any Religious education program that might be constructed, must grow out of and center around the experiences, relationships and situational dilemmas that black people face in their day to day struggles to survive, develop and progress in an often hostile, uncaring and majority-dominated society.'[3]

The challenge of attempting to develop such a Christian education curriculum specifically for black children and young people was an onerous one, given that no such models previously existed in this country. Yet, despite the difficult nature of the task, it was imperative that such a curriculum be developed, for without one, it would be difficult to envisage how the Church could attempt to meet the needs of and nurture faith within black children and young people. Our continuing failure to do so may lead ultimately to the demise of all inner city churches, for it is upon the experiences of these succeeding generations of black children that the future of such inner city churches rests.

Over the past eighteen months, assisted by a great deal of reading, both academic and practical, I have written a five-part 'African centred' Christian education curriculum. By 'African centred' I mean an approach that recognises a distinct and coherent black diasporan 'African' perspective on matters of spirituality, Christian faith, culture, identity and history. The curriculum is primarily for use within inner city churches with black children and young people.

The five constituent parts of the curriculum (in the order in which they were written) are:

- ADVENT (4 weeks of material),
- PENTECOST (2 weeks),
- HARVEST (1 week),
- COVENANT (1 week),
- LENT AND EASTER (4 weeks).

In addition to experiential material for four specific age-groups (from very young children through to teenagers), the material contains theological reflection and sermon notes, plus all-age liturgies.

The material attempts to link the present-day experiences of black children with the historical legacy of faith of their ancestors and forebears, all underpinned by a contextualised, black hermeneutic of specific

biblical texts The material has been heavily influenced by that great educationalist Paulo Freire, who believed that relevant and appropriate education for the oppressed makes them critically aware of their current situation and offers the necessary tools to remake their present-day realities.

If black children are to develop a faith that is a concrete reality, which enables them to cope with our post-modern society and be fully functioning human beings within that setting, then the process of Christian education that assists them in developing that faith must contain elements that equip such children for the task ahead.

The curriculum materials I have just described will hopefully be available for wider use across the country through publication sometime in 1998. The research to date has demonstrated, quite clearly, the effectiveness of this type of curriculum with black children and young people. Black children can clearly identify with, and display a greater range of expressive enthusiasm and relatedness to, an African-centred curriculum in which their own concerns and sense of identity are affirmed.

The ability to make links with the Bible and to see themselves as part of the ongoing story of God's interaction with God's people, is assisted when allied to a Christian education process that attempts to link black popular culture with matters of faith and faith development. There is a strong correlation between the effectiveness of the curriculum and the role of the adult educator in these settings. The material and method are most effective, and the reactions of the children most pronounced, when the adult leaders are black. The reciprocal relationship between adult and child affirms the cultural process, which in turn promotes greater levels of affective development and awareness within the black child. Children in the 4–6 age-range are aware of cultural differences and the existence of a distinctive black aesthetic and heritage, but have not begun to place any value judgements on them. One set of values, traditions and practices is not necessarily any better than another. At this age, children handle this dualism with ease. Church is a fun place to be.

The material has proved most successful young people in the 12-plus age-group. The material and accompanying methodology engage with black popular culture, allowing young people greater levels of autonomy to think through issues for themselves. Conversations with many of these teenagers have clearly indicated the ways in which this material and method have enabled them to feel a holistic and authentic part of the Church, on terms that are consistent with the cultural and historical identities that have defined black people for centuries.

I am conscious of the fact that I have just scratched the surface of what is a hugely complex and involving piece of research. Mention has not been made of the preponderance of white adults who work alongside the majority of black children in these inner city settings, and the need for such individuals to be affirmed and trained, in order that they can feel more confident in the role they exercise most Sundays.

One of the most significant findings, perhaps, has been the way in which the curriculum and the accompanying pedagogy have enabled some of these inner city churches to begin to effect systemic change within their congregational life. The research is beginning to highlight the means by which people of differing ages can be brought together, and how such individuals can be liberated and empowered, in order to become radically transformed and energised people of God.

The research has further bridges to cross. The journey without the aid of a map will continue. The acknowledged route towards a new theory and philosophy for the Christian education of black children and young people in Britain is beginning to emerge. My thanks go out to the many churches that have assisted me in this innovative and collaborative venture.

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Notes

1. Erskine, N, Decolonising Theology (Orbis Books, 1982), chapter 2.
2. Garvey, A J, Garvey and Garveyism (CollierMacMillan, 1970), p.29.
3. Shockley, G, 'Black Theology and Religious Education' in Theologies of Religious Education, ed. Miller, R C (Religious Education Press, 1995), p.321.

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