

EDITORIAL – WELCOMING AFRICANS

By Paul Beasley-Murray

Chelmsford, the county town of Essex where I minister, is only 35 minutes away from London by fast train, and yet at times we seem light years away from the metropolis. This is particularly true when it comes to multi-ethnicity, with its twin brother, multi-culturalism. Although with a population of over 150,000, we are not a small town, for many years we have been an almost exclusively white town. But now, thank God, a change is beginning to take place and people from other countries and cultures, in particular from Africa, are beginning to settle among us.

To my delight our church is beginning to reflect these changes in our community, with increasing numbers of people of African origins joining our church community and attending our services. The challenge which we face is how we might make the most of this special opportunity (*kairos*) for the Gospel.

The other evening I invited to my home three African couples who have recently become church members, to find out how they felt we might respond to what is for us a new situation. They made the following points and suggestions:

1. Most Africans coming to Britain have Christian roots and are looking for friendship. For them, church is a safe place to find friends. They encouraged us therefore to organise more social events, with a view to integrating people of different races. In so far as Africans delight in eating together, we agreed to put on more meals at church - indeed, meals prepared by Africans are quite an attraction. Another suggestion was to have an African fashion show - in a town like ours that would be a crowd-puller! Since many Africans are keen to play football, we agreed also to explore the possibility of starting our own church football team.

2. The key people to exploit this Gospel opportunity are our African members themselves. The fact is that there is on the part of many black people a sense of insecurity in relating to white people. They wonder to what extent will they be welcomed and valued? This insecurity causes a good number of African Christians in our town to travel into London to attend black-led churches there. Our African members felt that they, and not the white ministers, were the best people to follow up visitors.

3. Many Africans do not know how to access services and entitlements available to them, and as a result struggle unnecessarily. For example, although they may be well qualified and have a college or university degree, because they are desperate for money and do not know how to market themselves, they will often take low-paid menial jobs (e.g. domestic work or work in care homes). Our African members suggested we set up a Saturday information/resource centre for Africans in the community. We are fortunate in having a Friendship Centre (with toilets, drinks machine and computers) which we could set aside for this purpose.

4. Africans are musical people, who enjoy lively worship. They enjoy singing - many of our African members have sung in choirs. We agreed to explore the possibility of setting up a mixed Gospel Choir.

CARERS, NOT COUNSELLORS

J Alistair Ross

This article is adapted from the first chapter of *Counselling Skills for Church & Faith-Community Workers* (Open University 2003).

Linda was the head teacher of a demanding inner city primary school in London. As a new minister in the area I had gone in to see her to ask if I could do an assembly and she explained to me the local education authority's policy about multi-faith recognition and how she didn't want to 'push' a particular religion. I did point out that in an effort to be politically correct she was discriminating against Christianity because it did not feature at all. Linda recognised this so we arranged to do a Harvest assembly together. As we met to prepare this, at only our second meeting, I simply asked how she was, as Linda seemed to me to be very tired, with what I felt was a grey-tinged weariness. At this point she burst into floods of tears and I sat with her as she sobbed. Eventually Linda said through her tears that she had been doing this demanding job for two years and I was the first person ever to ask her how she was as a person. For the first time in two years she felt cared for; and this led Linda, slowly but surely, on a journey of