

**8. LET'S
PUSH
THINGS
FORWARD**

WHAT NEXT?

'You don't make progress by standing on the side lines, whimpering and complaining. You make progress by implementing ideas.'¹

Shirley Chisholm

American politician, educator and author

spck

My dream is that, one day, we will live in a post-racial society where people are not defined by the social construct of race. I long for the time when heritage can be celebrated and preserved without defining a person's personal identity, determining his or her place in society or outcome in life. We have already seen that the Bible points to a day when 'every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages' (Revelation 7.9) will stand before the throne of God as equals. We are far from this future reality.

Afua Hirsh, who wrote *Brit(ish): On race, identity and belonging*, states:

We cannot achieve this [a post-racial future] until we confront the fact that this is a racial present. We can't just let time and procreation do its work. The fact that by 2050, if the figures are right, more than one-third of the British population will be non-white, doesn't solve anything by itself, it just massively expands the number of people who will be affected by the problem. A problem about which we are in complete denial.²

In this final chapter, I want to suggest practical ways in which we can all strive towards racial reconciliation, unity, inclusion and integration in the UK Church. I believe there *are* ways of achieving this without becoming exhausted. Ways of confronting the present reality without losing sight of the hope we have for the future, in the completed work of Jesus Christ.

Black agency

The shortage of empathy and lack of responsiveness from some white Christians is what maintains racial inequality in the UK Church. But this is only part of the problem. We also need to acknowledge that passivity from black people does nothing to dismantle systems of racial discrimination. We need those, and

Let's push things forward

especially those with agency and inroads into white power structures, to take opportunities to challenge racism. White ignorance and black inaction are both forms of racist complicity.

Let me clarify what I mean. I'm aware that there are many black people with wealth, status and influence who do magnificent things for those less fortunate. Many black people in positions of power do great work behind the scenes to fight racial inequality. For example, many black people have become mentors and role models to younger black people. The idea of black agency is not about keeping a scorecard of which successful black person is doing more. Rather, the challenge is to black people who are fearful, detached or passive to begin to speak up in the face of prejudice in the Church. Speaking about her influence, Michelle Obama says, 'If there is one thing I have learnt in life it's the power of using your voice. I have tried as often as I could to speak the truth and shed light on the stories of people who are often brushed aside'.³

The same principle can be applied in the Church. If we are to see change, black people who have the ear of white decisionmakers should consider using these opportunities to speak on behalf of minorities who do not have the same access.

In essence, for racial equality to become a reality in the UK Church, some black people will need to put their necks and reputations on the line for the marginalized. Some black believers have settled for a lukewarm version of Christian justice. Not radical but weak, not potent but ineffective. The result: long-term systemic racism in the very place where it shouldn't be – Jesus' Church.

Have some black professionals become too comfortable to care about those feeling the full brunt of racial injustice? Do some well-educated black people prefer not to rock the boat, so as not to be seen as stereotypically rebellious as this might limit their pathways to church leadership? Maybe engaging with racial injustice brings back past trauma? Is there a perceived risk of being seen by white leadership as 'too black' or having a chip on your shoulder by engaging with

'black issues'? Maybe some black people who have good reputations with white decisionmakers are aiming to avoid becoming the 'black superhero' mentioned in Chapter 6? Perhaps they believe that black people who continually suffer racial injustice need to just pull their socks up, lift themselves up by their bootstraps and work hard – just like they did? The issue with this philosophy, as Dr Martin Luther King Jr said, is 'It's all right to tell a man to lift himself by his own bootstraps, but it is cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps.'⁴

Some of the reasons mentioned above are legitimate and well-considered. Talking about race can feel divisive, like opening up painful wounds we all wish weren't there. It's important to recognize that black people will come to a conversation about race looking through a range of different lenses, which may depend on their experiences of racism, nationality or cultural background. That is why it's so important for a range of black voices to be heard. The idea of a single black community is problematic – as already mentioned, we're not a monolith. Black people shouldn't have to be representatives for their race. Black British actor Daniel Kaluuya comments on this, stating, 'I'm not a spokesperson; I'm an individual . . . No one's expected to speak up for all white people. I'm just living my life. I'm a black man, I'm proud of it, but I'm just living my life.'⁵

People like Kaluuya are breaking down barriers through their work. One could argue that this is enough. Black people do not have an automatic interest in race or even an instinctive knowledge of the issues and experiences disproportionately affecting black people. However, in order for us all to thrive in white majority settings, we do need to equip ourselves with the tools to challenge racism. In the same article, Kaluuya goes on to say:

I don't like race debates . . . It doesn't mean I shy away from it, but I'm not 'interested in race'. It's just something I have to have a deep understanding and knowledge of, because of my

Let's push things forward

experience, and because I have to navigate the western world. It's something I have to know about first to survive, and then to thrive.⁶

As black people, even if talking about race is uncomfortable and is the last thing we want to do, like Kaluuya, we need to be aware of the issues and be prepared to speak on them when we see injustice. If we are committed to seeing a diverse Church in which everyone is able to flourish, we will need to take responsibility for one another, entering into one another's experiences and using our resources to speak out and tackle inequality when we see it.

We can learn from biblical figures such as Joseph (Genesis 41) and Esther (Esther 4) here. These people had the ear of the ruling class/majority culture. They worked on behalf of the oppressed and fought against injustice. They were advocates for the poor and marginalized, remembering their heritage. For racial inequality to be eradicated from the Church, the responsibility falls not only on white people to challenge the monolith of racism but also on black people with the economic resources, social status and cultural currency to listen to those with different experiences, step up, speak up and be counted. This will take courage and empathy. Righteous anger on behalf of the oppressed must replace passivity. Failure to engage in this way only strengthens racial structures.

White allies

'But Ben, don't *all* lives matter?'

It was at a church training event that my white friend Livy, in response to a conversation about the Black Lives Matter movement, asked the above question. It was the summer of 2016 and, in the space of two days, police in the USA had unjustly killed two black men, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile. Police brutality is not a new issue on either side of the Atlantic (see the UK police murders

of Dorothy 'Cherry' Groce in 1985 and the 2012 murder of Anthony Grainger as examples). Black Lives Matter is the movement started in the USA that has been the most vocal in speaking out about police brutality against black people. Black men aged 15–34 are between 9 and 16 times more likely to be killed by police than other people in America.⁷ Black Lives Matter states on its website, 'We are working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically targeted for demise.'⁸

My response to Livy was this: obviously all lives matter, but historically, in the USA, it has been black lives that have not been seen to have equal value. The execution of unarmed black people by the police is an extension of the long, brutal and violent history of racism in the USA. I've known Livy for over ten years. Livy and her husband Stu Gibbs (also white) started Emmanuel Church London in 2008. Over the years, Livy and I have had many conversations about race – some awkward, but always leading to a better understanding of race issues from one another's perspectives. What happened next was 48 hours of Livy and I intensely going back and forth via text and email, sending articles, reports, films and blog posts engaging with the issue of police brutality in the USA. This led to Stu and Livy asking me the question: how should we respond as a church? I suggested that it would send a powerful message if we prayed for the USA and the issue of police brutality from the front on a Sunday. I knew that many black people in our church were traumatized by what had been happening in the USA. The obvious person to lead prayer about the issue was me, but I declined and suggested that a white person lead. The reason for this was to make it a whole church issue; a demonstration that when one part of the body suffers, we all collectively share the pain (1 Corinthians 12.26). It's a human issue, not just a black problem. Stuart Baker, who I mentioned in Chapter 2, prayed a heartfelt, rich and empathetic prayer about the racial injustice in the USA. After the service I asked a couple of black people about their thoughts on the prayer. One person commented,

Let's push things forward

'I was pleasantly surprised and encouraged that the church (which is white majority) would care about an issue like this'. Another person said, 'It was nice that a white person prayed as it demonstrated empathy about minority culture issues.'

The reason why Livy was able to participate in a potentially explosive conversation about race was due to us having over ten years of friendship as a starting point. We know each other; we've spent time together, laughed, cried and prayed together. This was not the first time we have had a discussion about race. People sometimes make the mistake of opening up a very deep, personal and exposing debate without making an effort to get to know the person first. The last thing I need when I first meet someone is to start a conversation about racism! This should be a provocation for white members of the Church to actively get to know black people. This will mean moving from your favourite seat on a Sunday to connect with a black person. You might have to invite someone over for dinner again and again until the atmosphere becomes less awkward. White people may ask, 'Why must I make all the effort?' The answer is easy: you're the majority culture and you are part of the power structure, whether you know it or not.

As the Revd Dr Kate Coleman said, white endorsement for a black person can open doors and change opinion. The idea that white validation is needed for black people to progress may split opinion, but if we are to see racial unity within the Church, black people will need more white allies – white allies who are committed to racial equality and unity. We must not confuse white allies with white saviours (serving black people but with self-serving interests). The fundamental difference between white allies and white saviours is that one listens and has empathy while the other tries to control and dominate. It is important to understand that becoming a white ally is often about what is unseen. For example, there are white parents in our church who are intentional about exposing their white children to literature and toys portraying positive images of black and brown

Let's push things forward

people. Other white friends have invested time and money in causes and charities combating issues that excessively affect black people.

Commenting on the 2017 appointment of Donald Trump as President of the United States in an article for *Sojourners* magazine entitled 'Is this a Bonhoeffer moment?', Lori Brandt Hale and Reegie L. Williams, asked the question, 'In the midst of this current political maelstrom, do you individually or collectively want to be a perpetrator, bystander, or resister? Everything is at stake.'⁹

The German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who had a deep care and interest in African American history and the black church, became a member of a conspiracy that was responsible for a coup attempt against Hitler. Twelve years after he became one of the first voices in Germany to offer public opposition to the Nazis, they executed Bonhoeffer as a traitor. Hale and Williams suggest that, as Christians, we all should be challenged by Bonhoeffer's example. So often, when it comes to matters of injustice, we fall somewhere on the spectrum of perpetrator, bystander or resister. Their point is that inaction is a form of collusion. Bonhoeffer decided early on, witnessing the evil ideology of Hitler, to be a resister. The question is this: as a white person, are you brave enough to engage with minority culture issues, stand with your black brothers and sisters and create spaces for them to be heard, included and integrated into the life of the Church? In Bonhoeffer's time it was clear – the Nazi's were the perpetrators and the Catholic Church was the bystander. White people, when it comes to the UK Church, race relations and the issues that impact black people, can be asked the same question: are you a perpetrator, bystander or resister?

My people . . . hold on

If you are black, how do you survive the pressure and strain of operating in predominantly white spaces? The Revd Dr Kate Coleman said, 'What you need is an immersive space where you don't have to

Let's push things forward

explain yourself.' Whether this 'immersive space' is at home with your spouse, at work through a diversity network or with friends, it's important to seek out and invest in relationships with people who get you, understand you and are for you. Not all white people are naive about racism and not all black people are 'woke'¹⁰. As a black person, sometimes life at church becomes too much, especially if you are the only black person or black representation is minimal. My reactions can vary from rage to sadness to numbness to detachment. So, for survival purposes, I have created sanctuaries. Places of beautiful, rich refuge where I do not have to explain myself to anyone, where I can be unapologetically myself. Where I can explain difficult situations and circumstances and not feel judged. For me this means prioritizing time with my wife and friends who really understand me. These times are refreshing and stimulating. For people of colour to consistently engage in the battle for inclusion and integration in white majority churches, we must create environments where we can heal, recharge, laugh, cry, laugh some more and be honest about our circumstances. These places of sanctuary have saved me from turning my back on white church spaces. Finding a sanctuary can also mean searching for resources – books, music, podcasts, art, films and courses – that discuss and present the black experience, which provide a sense of solidarity, energize you or bring rest.

A friend of mine recently felt God had given him a vision for me. In it, he saw me getting out of my car with a heavy, long trench coat on. As I approached my front door, he saw a coat stand outside. He saw me putting the heavy coat I was wearing on the coat stand. I then went inside and closed the door. The heavy coat and the coat stand were left outside. My friend said he felt the heavy coat was a representation of the issues that I am carrying and engaging in. These included community issues, such as youth violence and racial injustice. His point was that, although the burdens and issues the coat represented were things I enjoyed finding solutions for, there are times when I need to put these things down and rest. I need to be

Let's push things forward

mindful that the battle against social injustice does not dominate and consume my whole life.

The temptation can be for issues of racial inequality to be front and centre of all we do. We tweet about it, we blog about it, we watch films and read books about it. We flood and feed our minds, trying to tackle this issue, to the point that every white person is a potential threat and every discussion we have involves deconstructing racial structures. We can become exhausted and drained. As Christians, we need to be aware that while racism should be attacked, called out and tackled, it can never be the focus of our existence and become all-consuming. Protesting racism should not become an idol or a false god. Speaking decades after contributing to the civil rights movement in the USA, the singer Nina Simone, who had suffered from crippling depression, was asked the question regarding how far the civil rights movement had come. Her response:

'There aren't any civil rights,' Simone says.

'What do you mean?' the bemused interviewer asks.

'There is no reason to sing those songs, nothing is happening,' Simone replied.

'There's no civil-rights movement. Everybody's gone.'¹¹

There was clearly a sense of regret and disappointment that she had put so much energy into something that, in her view, had cost her fame, fortune, friends and, most importantly, her mental well-being. I've known black people to leave churches, lose friends, become bitter and neglect their families because of a lack of boundaries in the area of tackling racism in the Church. If we do not believe the wisdom of 1 Peter 5.7 – that we need to cast our cares on him – the burden of racial injustice becomes too much to bear. The evil of racism robs us of hope; it will govern our thinking and rule our lives. There are certainly moments when we should put the heavy coat on and fight the power of racism in the strength of Jesus our conquering

Let's push things forward

lion. Then there are times when we are to leave the coat outside, close the door and rest in green pastures with Jesus, our Shepherd. We are to look after ourselves and not neglect the wellness of our mind, body and soul in our fight against racial injustice. We need to exercise, eat well and disengage from social media once in a while. It can also be helpful to seek culturally competent therapy – therapists or counsellors with experience of working with culturally diverse clients (even if there is nothing wrong). Above all, seek the word of God, pray and remember to leave the heavy coat outside the front door. It will always be there tomorrow.

Fight the power or power the fight?

In 1989, the black filmmaker Spike Lee made the now legendary film *Do the Right Thing*. Set in summertime Brooklyn, USA, the film chronicles the racial tensions within the hyper-diverse communities and the relationship with the New York police department. The climax of the film is tragic, blistering and ferocious. The lead song of the soundtrack, 'Fight the power' is by the group Public Enemy. With lyrics such as that freedom of speech is 'freedom or death' and we need to 'fight the powers that be', the song perfectly depicts the struggle against racial discrimination that, unfortunately, has continued in the USA and here in the UK. I was recently praying and sensed that, while we are called to fight the powers of injustice, racism, sexism and many other forms of discrimination, to be sustainable and effective, we need to consider how we power that fight. As Christians, we are told in the book of Ephesians that, 'we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.' (Ephesians 6.12).

Racism falls into the category of 'present darkness' and, therefore, if racism is evil and there is a spiritual dynamic to its outworking, racial injustice must be tackled first and foremost with the spiritual

weapons God gives us – one being prayer. As it says in Ephesians 6.18, we should be 'Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.'

Prayer opens and reveals the issues of the human heart. Prayer can lead to repentance and forgiveness. Often when we are open to God speaking to us, he will direct us in unexpected ways. Acts 10 gives an example of the power of prayer in crossing cultural and racial divides. The story describes an interaction between three characters: God, Peter (a Jewish man, a disciple of Jesus and a leader in starting the early Church) and Cornelius (a Roman military captain, a Gentile). The story begins with Cornelius praying and hearing God pointing him towards the home of Peter. At the same time, Peter is praying and receives a revelation from God relating to the Jewish commandments concerning food. This vision challenges Peter's prejudice towards Gentiles (non-Jews). The revelation leads God to say to Peter in verse 15 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' It is a fascinating interaction in which two strangers head towards an encounter with one another; people who would normally detest each other because of their racial backgrounds and histories. Yet, because of God's intervention, and their obedience to God's promptings, we observe an encounter that becomes a catalyst for a striking display of solidarity, reconciliation and unity. This meeting results in Peter saying to Cornelius, 'Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.' (vv. 34–5).

Peter the Jew shares the good news of Jesus with Cornelius the Gentile and his family. This is meaningful for many reasons, but mainly because Peter's heart was exposed to his hidden prejudice towards the Gentiles. This encounter became the impetus and trigger for the message of Jesus to be shared outside the Jewish community. From this story, three things are clear. First, Peter's prejudice was an obstruction to the message of Jesus spreading beyond the majority

Let's push things forward

culture. Second, the story shows a correlation between our attitudes towards inclusion and the potential for monoculture in Christianity. Third, the apathy towards diversity or laziness in crossing racial divides are limiting factors in terms of people becoming Christians.

In our quest to have a Church that truly represents the heart of Jesus, real and hard questions need to be asked. As a white Christian, what shapes your views or expectations of people of colour? Like Peter, is it possible that your attitudes towards people of colour are the blockage to racial diversity and radical solidarity developing in your church? Until Peter had the interaction with Cornelius, Christianity had only connected with the Jewish population. For ten years, the Church was slow in reaching out to the Gentiles. God's revelation to Peter of his desire for inclusivity resulted in exponential growth for the next 2,000 years. However, more than just a numerical gain, the impetus to cross the divide for reconciliation and acceptance was modelled first and foremost by Jesus (see Philippians 2, Romans 5.10, Colossians 1.20–22).

As Christians, we are to model the sacrificial, inclusive, impartial, humble approach of Jesus and be intentional in crossing the racial divides in our communities. For this to happen, we are going to need the help of the Holy Spirit, who produces 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Galatians 5.22–23). There is no point in having a loving attitude towards God if we have a hateful or indifferent stance towards people made in his own image. The health of the UK Church depends on all our hearts becoming more like the heart of Jesus.

We must power the fight against racism with prayer. If we power the fight against racial injustice with willpower, hard work, protest and activism alone, we will become exhausted. Prayer gives the battle over to Jesus. Prayer fuels our action. Through prayer, Jesus will give us strength, truth, wisdom, peace, insight, love, forgiveness and power. Through prayer, God wins the main battleground – the human heart. As Christians, we are called to fight the power of

Let's push things forward

inequality and injustice. We are also called to power that fight with prayer. Let's combine prayer and action to rid the UK Church and our own hearts of prejudice and racism.

Unmuted

As mentioned in the Introduction, talking about race is hard. In my experience, when approaching the topic of race, many black people feel there is a need to broaden and deepen the usual conversations, bringing in historic issues (such as slavery), cultural observations (such as white privilege) and structural blockages (such as institutional racism). White people tend to steer the conversation to the specific ('I can't be blamed for the sins of my ancestors'), personal ('I've never said anything racist') or procedural ('there's no such thing as structural racism'). Just because a white person doesn't see racism in his or her everyday life, doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. We cannot talk about the present without discussing the past. As frustrating as it might be for a white person to hear about historic events that occurred long before they were born, for black people, it's an important part of the dialogue in moving forwards. White people need to become better listeners to their black brothers and sisters – that is, listening without always offering solutions or making swift assumptions. Black people need to be empowered to move away from being passive bystanders and towards becoming agents of change. If you are black, let me say to you: you're not imagining the issues, you have not got a chip on your shoulder, you have the right to call things out and, when you do, you're not being aggressive. Unmute your voice and prayerfully speak against racial injustice in your church context.

With the rise of the far right globally and the spike in hate crime nationally following the vote to leave the European Union, now is the time for the Church to shine a light on the darkness of racism. Jesus is the light. Our job is to allow his light to reveal any darkness in our own hearts and reflect the light of Jesus to others. We must not let

Let's push things forward

fear prevent us from considering the difficult issues of racism in the Church and beyond. The stakes are too high. The world around us is in desperate need of displays of racial unity and a multicoloured picture of hope. I believe the Church of Jesus Christ has the power to be this witness. How do we get there? It will be a long and difficult journey, but we can start by talking about race.

For your consideration

Person of colour Do you have an 'immersive space' where you can recharge and be energized while dealing with everyday racism?

White church leader What do you see as the qualities of a good ally? How could you and your congregation embody these qualities in solidarity with your black brothers and sisters?

White church member Do you see yourself as a white ally in challenging the structures of racism in your church and beyond?

Looking in How do you think some of the ideas I've presented in this chapter (black agency, white allies, finding an immersive space) could relate to you in your context?