
Overcoming Racism in the Church

MIGRANT CHURCHES IN A RACIST CONTEXT IN EUROPE

My name is Apostle Adejare Oyewole. I am the current Secretary General of Unification of Cherubim and Seraphim Churches, Europe Chapter. Cherubim and Seraphim Church was founded by St. Moses Orimolade TunOlase of blessed memory on 8th September 1925 in Nigeria. The Church is planning to hold her centenary celebration in September 2025.

I am a Pastor in one of the parishes of the Church in central London, in United Kingdom. I am also a civil servant working as a Building Surveyor in a local authority in greater London because most migrant Church Pastors are not paid and as such must have a job alongside their pastoral duties.

I am also the current Treasurer of Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) which operates from its administrative Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium.

I have been asked to share my perspective and those also of the political and strategic context of the work of CCME and the challenging role that CCME is playing in Churches in Europe, mentioning the issues present and churches' responsibilities.

I would like to start by reciting my understanding of Christian duty.

The spiritual heritage of Christianity constitutes an empowering source of inspiration and enrichment of our faith in God through Jesus Christ.

As people from different cultures and traditions come closer, it is crucial to highlight the importance of inter-cultural dialogue. This conference provides a platform and a safe environment for such dialogue where people can engage in common concerns, for example, the issue of protecting persons who face persecution, discrimination, racism and the injustices of economic and Church structures. In working for the good of others, we must be prepared to take strategic steps to champion the cause of oppressed, embrace equity because it's the right thing to do.

The Church must not permit, in fact must indeed reject a system that puts migrants, migrant Churches, her members and Black people in general in a position of servitude.

The Bible is about freedom and justice. How to harmonise freedom and justice in this world of sin should be of major concern and of paramount importance for Church and religious leaders.

We must include life in faith and bring faith into life – we cannot do one without the other.

The complexities of power and dynamics, global systems and structures, local realities and the practices and rules of the so-called political centre are massively discriminatory against the global south people. Christian missions have at times been understood and practised in ways which failed to recognise God's alignment with those consistently pushed to the margins. Therefore, marginalised people invite the Church to re-imagine mission as a vocation from God's spirit who works for a world where the fullness of life is available for all. The story of a Christian who happens to be Black looking for a Church to worship in Malaga, Spain is an example of how Black people continue to be marginalised by established Churches in Europe. The story is of a Black Christian looking for a Church to worship in Malaga. He found a Church (that I will not name the denomination) and was immediately told by the Priest that the Church he was looking for is down the road, referring to a mainly Black migrant congregation. This is an example of migrant Christians in a racist context in Europe. The rejection of diversity in our Churches in Europe.

The upsurge of migrant Churches in Europe is because of such rejection. Migrants wanting to feel fulfilled in a worship environment they are used to – but confronted / challenged by non-acceptance by other Christian denominations who see their mode of worship as alien to theirs. Diversity ought to be celebrated and not condemned. Some mainline Churches refuse to share their buildings with migrant congregations who cannot find a place to worship and most of these congregations end up using commercial places like retail shops / stores, warehouses, hospitality spaces and public houses to meet for their worship.

The perception that mission can **ONLY** be done by the powerful to the powerless, by the rich to the poor, or by the privileged to the marginalised contributes to the oppression and marginalisation of global majority people.

Missions expressed in this way has too often been complicit with oppressive and life-denying systems motivated by an attitude of paternalism and superiority complex. Historically, this has equated Christianity with Western culture and resulted in adverse consequences, including the denial of full personhood of the victims of marginalisation.

Racism has been a central concern of the ecumenical movement since its inception. The inaugural World Council of Churches (WCC) Assembly in 1948 in Amsterdam recognized "prejudice based upon race or colour" and "practices of discrimination and segregation" as "denials of justice and human dignity." WCC already acknowledge that there was problem of racism in the society including in the Church. It proclaimed that racism is a sin against God. Persistence of racism both in the Church and the society makes the world not to have peace. Discrimination and other forms of unfair treatment, especially of global south majority people have evidently increased since 2015 when more than a million migrants and refugees crossed into Europe – the largest movement of people the continent has seen since the end of the Second World War.

All this is happening in a context where rising right-wing movements have identified Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic as targets of their hate. A colleague once said “It is worrying that it’s no longer safe to be a Black man or woman on the street”.

Confronting racism and fighting for racial justice are and should be our ecumenical contribution toward the renewal of the Church. Although Churches today understand racism to be a sin and its theological justification a heresy, this has not always been the case. The ecumenical family therefore needs to continue addressing our history and our reality self-critically.

Ecumenical action to combat racism – is needed now more than ever before for the world to have and enjoy peace. The world is a global village where people should be able to exercise their human rights of freedom of movement freely.

Migrants must be included in the leadership of mainline Churches and in ecumenical bodies. Inclusion in leadership goes beyond representation but goes to inclusion – relationship building right across the structures of the Church.

Another world is possible, where justice, peace and inclusion – inter-connectedness is practised.

Transformative justice / restitution / reparation - to affirm / uphold All people’s dignity will assist in addressing the injustices and inequalities that is presently making the world a dangerous place to live in.

Regarding the political and strategic context of the work of CCME and the challenging role that CCME is playing for the churches in Europe citing the present issues and churches' responsibilities.

I will like to go back in history, when ships leaves the shores of Britain empty, collect human beings as cargos some of them are dumped in the sea during the journey. To commodify humanity based on skin colour is criminal. Biblical narrative used to exploit Black Africans – At best sinful and at worst abominable.

Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) is a long standing – anti-racism campaigning organisation, advocating for all persons made in God’s image to be treated with dignity, respect and seen as neighbours rather than “the others”. For us as CCME, overcoming racism is part of our mandate as Article 1 (1) of our statutes stipulate our role as “ecumenical commission on Migration, Asylum and Anti-racism”. Obviously, the issue of racism in Europe is broad – going from the situation of Roma in Europe to the treatment of indigenous populations, right into the history of colonialism and the intersection between racism and discrimination of migrants.

It is only in recent years that European churches are more broadly acknowledging their role of promoting as well as practically and theologically supporting colonialism, particularly in Africa. The task of de-colonialising Church has just been taken up and there is a long way to go. For us as CCME the question has also been as a CCME event in 2021 asked: Does “Black Lives Matter – what have churches in Europe learnt”. It is criminal to dehumanise and exploit human beings / other people

because of their race, suppressing their capacity to realise their full potential. History records the dehumanisation of African people because of how they look.

In the UK, 30 years ago the inquiry into the killing of Black teenager Stephen Lawrence led to the conclusion that institutional racism was an everyday reality. Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) have this year asked where things are today.

Today, Black teenagers are experiencing clear discrimination in education, jobs or housing. They are 9 times as likely to be stopped on suspicion of drug possession than white teenagers and during COVID, the likelihood of dying among the Black community was significantly higher than among whites. Obviously, the experience of Black teenagers is mirrored in other age groups. Reality in other countries is similar though less well-documented.

This background clearly explains why today's debate is so essential for us as CCME as we look at Churches and especially those that want to live in peace, as Churches counter these harmful attitudes not least in the particular context of migration and ways to overcome it in our Churches and society.

In doing mission, we are aiming for unity – unity in Christ bring souls to Christ – What the future look like for Black people and how can the Churches help to make a bleak outlook become better – Sharing resources – viewing each other as equal partners and witnessing together. We need each other to proclaim the gospel.

Our distinctiveness is very important – differences in practice – must be respected.

Non-white people being held to higher standard – not welcome, should be same standard for all people, the sort of standard expected across the Church must be the same.

Perpetuating a system that continue to make other people suppressed must no longer be tolerated in our Churches.

The Church take racism seriously and address / challenge structural discrimination to bring about attitudinal, culture and systemic change that will enable people from diverse culture and race to trust and have confidence in the leadership of the Church. The Church must build the trust of those who have been historically hurt or suffered in the past.

The Church must strategize to remove barriers that enables injustice and unfairness to thrive in our Churches – where there is no peace, there can be no progress.

Ending racism living in peace is good for the whole world. As citizens of God's kingdom, we must learn to share in all things with others. We must be courageous in living the gospel – "Romans 12:18 encourages us to live in peace with others as much as possible" so that our lights will be in a high place where it shines for all to see.

A small change contributes to a bigger change – inclusion means equity and equal opportunity.

Desmon Tutu once said and I quote “If **you are neutral** in **situations of injustice**, **you** have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and **you** say that **you are neutral**, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality”.

My key message is one of encouragement – I would encourage you to take active part in joining a movement to recognise and expose systemic racism, stimulate conversations and debates on how we can achieve freedom from racism for all people of colour, both Black and White.

Freeing ourselves from racism is a battle, a conscious decision to act; to recognise and expose racism where it occurs, to change systems and processes to remove oppression and bias from our world. Global problem require global solution and we have to do it together.

I urge you all to consider how you can be an active ally of Black people, of Migrants of the global majority people, how you can be actively anti-racist helping to speak out about racism wherever you find it, institutionally or individually.

I close with Mark Shepard song – 12345678 I believe it's not too late – Together we can change the world. Apologies I do not have a singing voice but I'll say, “In togetherness we are one and together we can be victorious in our effort to change the world”.

Thank you for listening.