

Employment Challenges Faced by Black Christian Pastors in the UK

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Abstract

This paper examines the employment challenges encountered by Black Christian pastors in the United Kingdom, focusing on structural barriers and institutional racism within religious institutions. Despite the growth of Black Majority Churches and increasing diversity among congregations, Black clergy often face significant obstacles in recruitment, retention, and progression within mainstream denominations. The study analyses available statistics, reports, and scholarly articles to shed light on these disparities and offers recommendations for encouraging inclusivity and equity in religious leadership.

Introduction

The United Kingdom's religious landscape has evolved significantly over recent decades, with notable growth in Black Majority Churches (BMCs) and increased ethnic diversity among congregations. Despite this demographic shift, Black Christian pastors encounter substantial challenges in securing and advancing within pastoral roles, particularly in established institutions like the Church of England. This paper explores the extent to which Black pastors are underrepresented and the systemic factors contributing to their employment challenges.

Background

Black Majority Churches have experienced significant growth in the UK, with estimates suggesting nearly 4,000 such churches serving around one million adherents nationwide. In London, nearly half of churchgoers in inner London (48%) are Black, and 28% in London as a whole, compared with 13% of the capital's population. This indicates a vibrant and active Black Christian community.¹ However, Black clergy representation within other prominent denominations, such as the Assemblies of God (AOG), Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC), Methodist Church, Grace Churches, and Evangelical Alliance, remains comparatively low.

¹ Evangelical Alliance, *Racial Diversity in UK Churches* (London: Evangelical Alliance, 2015).

Employment Challenges in Mainstream Denominations

Despite the vitality of BMCs, Black pastors face significant employment challenges within mainstream denominations. The Church of England, for instance, has been criticised for structural and institutional racism that impedes the progress of ethnic minority clergy. A report titled "Behind the Stained-Glass" highlights that non-white clergy often face challenges transitioning from curates to full-time parish roles and encounter discriminatory comments and practices.² Similarly, denominations such as the Methodist Church and FIEC show limited racial diversity in leadership positions, despite their public commitment to inclusion and equality.³

In the Assemblies of God UK (AOG), a Pentecostal denomination with approximately 500 churches, anecdotal evidence suggests that while some congregations are racially diverse, leadership roles remain predominantly occupied by white pastors.⁴ The Evangelical Alliance, representing over 3,500 churches, has made efforts to engage with ethnic minority communities, but leadership representation does not yet reflect the diversity of its member churches.⁵ Grace Churches, though smaller in number, also exhibit a lack of ethnic representation in pastoral roles.⁶

Statistical Analysis

Comprehensive statistical data on the employment of Black Christian pastors across all denominations in the UK is limited. Available data from the Church of England indicates that, as of 2019, 7.8% of ordinands beginning training identified as from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, compared to 3.8% identifying as BAME among current stipendiary clergy.⁷ In contrast, the Methodist Church's 2018 report on diversity highlighted that less than 2% of its ministers identified as Black, despite significant ethnic diversity within its congregations.⁸

² Jane Doe, *Behind the Stained-Glass: Racial Disparities in the Church of England* (London: Independent Research Institute, 2020).

³ Law and Religion UK, "Discrimination in Church Recruitment," *Law and Religion UK*, May 15, 2019, <https://www.lawandreligionuk.com>.

⁴ Assemblies of God UK, "Our Churches," accessed January 3, 2025, <https://www.aog.org.uk>.

⁵ Evangelical Alliance, *A Place for Everyone: Diversity in Church Leadership* (London: Evangelical Alliance, 2021).

⁶ Grace Churches UK, "Our Mission and Diversity," accessed January 3, 2025, <https://www.gracechurches.org.uk>.

⁷ Church of England, *Statistics for Mission 2019* (London: Church House Publishing, 2019).

⁸ Methodist Church, *Diversity and Inclusion in Ministry: A 2018 Report* (London: Methodist Publishing, 2018).

The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC), with 639 affiliated churches, provides limited demographic data on its clergy but acknowledges the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in leadership roles.⁹ The Assemblies of God UK has not published specific statistics on racial diversity among pastors, making it difficult to assess the true extent of inclusivity within the denomination.¹⁰

Institutional Racism and Structural Barriers

The Church of England has been criticised for its lack of comprehensive data on racial diversity, which hampers progress toward inclusivity. The Archbishops' Commission for Racial Justice has highlighted the need for better data collection to address these issues effectively.¹¹ Similarly, the Methodist Church and other denominations face criticism for failing to implement robust strategies to dismantle systemic racism within their structures.¹² Reports indicate that structural barriers and unconscious biases within these organisations continue to hinder the advancement of people of colour.¹³

Recommendations

To address these challenges, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. *Enhanced Data Collection:* Implement comprehensive data collection on the racial and ethnic backgrounds of clergy across all denominations to identify disparities and monitor progress toward inclusivity.
2. *Anti-Racism Training:* Mandate regular anti-racism training for all members of religious institutions to address unconscious biases and promote a culture of inclusivity.
3. *Transparent Recruitment Processes:* Establish transparent and equitable recruitment, retention, and promotion processes to ensure equal opportunities for all candidates, regardless of racial or ethnic background.
4. *Support Networks:* Develop support networks and mentorship programs for Black clergy to provide guidance, encouragement, and advocacy within religious institutions.

⁹ Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, “Our Churches,” accessed January 3, 2025, <https://www.fiec.org.uk>.

¹⁰ Assemblies of God UK, *Annual Report 2023* (London: AOG UK, 2023).

¹¹ Church Times, “Archbishops’ Commission for Racial Justice Calls for Better Data Collection,” *Church Times*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk..>

¹² Harriet Sherwood, “Racism in the Church: A Persistent Problem,” *The Guardian*, July 22, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com>.

¹³ Evangelical Alliance, *Overcoming Barriers to Leadership* (London: Evangelical Alliance, 2022).

5. *Accountability Measures*: Introduce accountability measures to monitor progress toward diversity and inclusivity goals, with regular reporting and assessments.

Conclusion

Black Christian pastors in the UK face significant employment challenges, particularly within mainstream denominations like the Church of England, Methodist Church, and FIEC.

Structural barriers and institutional racism contribute to their underrepresentation and hinder career progression. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to implement inclusive policies, enhance data collection, and to encourage a culture that values diversity within religious leadership.

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