Reflections on Immigration: A Case Study

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It was a September day in 1984, but it was not just any day; it was the day we were moving house. We were going to be moving from a house in Berkshire, England, to the South Coast of England, having been relocated with my husband’s work.

Several times during the previous months we had been looking for somewhere to live. Not only was it a case of trying to find somewhere we could afford, but somewhere which was central to both of our jobs and somewhere which would give us access to a good Adventist church. We wanted to belong to a church where we could take an active part, and a church where we as White Brits would fit into the culture.

Having taken all of this into account, we eventually found a place and we were now on the move. We waited with anticipation as the removal van drew up outside our new home and then we began the thankless task of emptying boxes, moving furniture, hanging curtains, etc., so that our new house would be somewhere we could call home.

We soon settled both into our house and into the local Adventist Church, and before long became involved in the Sabbath School and the Young People’s Departments. The church was great. It was made up predominantly of British families, several of which were of a similar age to us. We were made to feel very welcome and before long we felt as if we really did belong.

We worshipped in our comfort zone for many years, watching children grow up, and indeed bringing our own children up in a great church family environment.

We would sometimes organize church events in our own home to which we invited our neighbors who usually did accept our invitations and come along to join in the fellowship, particularly to bonfire parties which were always great fun.

And then about ten years ago things slowly began to change. It was
very gradual, so gradual that at first we did not notice it, and it definitely
did not bother us. The makeup of our church membership was changing
from being predominantly White British, to being more of a cosmopolitan
mixture. It was nice to have the opportunity to become friends with fellow
Adventists from other countries. It was good to learn about their culture
and to share experiences. It was fun to hear about the lives of our church
members in their home countries and to hear their stories of home. Ini-
tially we had one family from Africa who came to the UK on a temporary
assignment from one of the African Governments, for whom the man of
the family worked.

When we heard what this family had left behind though, we realized
how different their life in England was to the life they led in Africa, where
they lived in a large house with servants; compared to the tiny house they
rented in the UK, which was not in a very nice area. They never com-
plained, they just accepted their lot and took an active part in our church.
At the end of their allotted time they left and returned home to Africa.
Shortly after that our once half full (or empty church depending upon
your perspective) slowly began to increase in number, so that on some
Sabbaths it was difficult to find a seat.

Some ten years previously our church had around fifty members on
the books, but now this was well on the way to doubling that number.
However, even though the number of people attending had significant-
ly increased, the increase was mainly due to members of the Adventist
World Church relocating to the UK, it was not due to people from the sur-
rounding area attending Sabbath services.

Over a period of time our minister had introduced a more upbeat wor-
ship style by the standards of a lot of Adventist churches. Instead of us-
ing hymns solely from the *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, we would have
a mixture of traditional hymns and more modern worship songs which
were displayed on a screen initially using an overhead projector and then
more recently using a laptop. Our worship on a Sabbath morning was be-
ing moved to a more modern format. Worship was becoming more mean-
ingful as we praised God by singing praise hymns such as “Shine Jesus
Shine” and “What Kind of Love Is This?” Church began to mean some-
thing, particularly to the teen members of the congregation.

Included in the increase in number of those attending church were a
number of young people. The majority of them came from the African
continent, but did the British young people mind? No, not at all. Every
Saturday evening most of the young people would meet at the home of
one of the African youth who lived near the center of town, to have pizza,
watch movies, and generally have fun. This went on for several years. The
church adapted to the ever changing makeup of its congregation but the
services were meaningful and all seemed to benefit from them and receive a blessing.

It was during this time that our teenage children both decided to take their stand and become baptized members of the Adventist Church. This was in part due to them realizing that church need not be stuffy and boring, but it could be both fun and meaningful at the same time.

Then there was a radical change as many of the “White” families ceased worshipping as part of the main church congregation, as a church plant was set up in another area of town with the express aim of being a long term community project to primarily engage with the White indigenous population. The community at large had been asked what they wanted to get out of church if they had the opportunity to attend. Based on the results of this survey, the church plant was established to meet the needs of the community, not the other way round. Some of our key church families left to join this project and we toyed with the idea, but after much thought we decided not to join them as the project required more commitment than we were able to give, and was located many miles away from our home.

After the church plant families had left, the makeup of the church membership changed to being approximately 75 percent African, 10 percent White British with the remainder having roots in countries such as the Philippines, West Indies, and Romania. Gradually other White families left to worship in different local churches where they felt more comfortable and could gain a richer blessing.

One of our daughters decided on one occasion, to take one of her non-churched friends to a church social; our daughter decided that it was about time her friend saw where she spent Saturdays and to meet some of the people she spent them with. That was not a good idea, as it turned out, as it was not easy for someone who is not used to being in a cosmopolitan environment to walk into a room where only a handful of people are White British. Needless to say that particular friend did not visit the church again. I for one did not feel comfortable taking non-Adventist friends to the Church, not because the members were not friendly—they were always quite the opposite. Being culturally a minority is not easy, for culturally the various groups in the church were poles apart, from the food we ate, to the social activities which appealed to us.

However the impact was not all negative by any means. As a church elder being responsible for the ladies of the church, along with my youngest daughter, I attended a ladies weekend in a Christian conference centre not far from where we live. Sabbath was an amazing experience with a very uplifting worship service. The worship style did not bother us (no modern worship songs here!). The preacher was a lady from the United Kingdom.
States who, despite her rather at times loud delivery, was none the less uplifting. The fellowship was great—we were made to feel very welcome.

In the evening we were invited to attend a banquet where all of the ladies were encouraged to wear long smart dresses. This in itself was a revelation for us somewhat conservative Brits. At the end of the evening we all joined hands, and along with the conference centre staff, sang “When We All Get to Heaven,” which was in itself an experience. Those who at first only observed, were encouraged to join in, which they did.

There were also other cultural based issues which caused problems such as should we serve chicken at church events. Being brought up to believe that it was better not to eat flesh food (but we would not be damned for it), the church board had previously agreed that only vegetarian food would be served at church functions. However we were now faced with the issue that unless chicken could be served, some members simply would not attend. Apart from anything else this caused issues around food hygiene as up to now there was never a problem about where to store cooked meat.

One of the most significant factors immigration had on the witness of the Adventist Church was that local unchurched indigenous people just did not feel comfortable in an environment which was way outside of the British culture comfort zone. Sadly this had a huge impact on the evangelistic activities of the church. The attendance of the dominant White population at events which were not within their culture comfort zone was virtually nil.

It was not only outsiders who did not feel comfortable worshipping in an environment which they had once thought of as “home,” some families simply stopped coming, as they did not feel able to relate to the church anymore and so they left. Maybe they would have left anyway and this was the final “straw”—we will never know.

The church plant however, was going from strength to strength. The core team was nearly all White British and the community members who attended the church plant activities were practically all from the White indigenous majority population. The church plant focused on meeting the needs of people to allow them to live, learn, love, and laugh, with all of these areas overlapping to a greater or lesser degree. Members of the community were invited to attend parenting classes, debt counseling seminars, marriage courses, budgeting seminars, etc. They were also invited to attend small group meetings, prayer groups, and church services. Community social events were organized such as Treasure Hunts and Easter Egg hunts to name but a few. The church plant attendees were also encouraged to be involved in local community initiatives such as becoming part of the local primary school. Indeed one member of the church
plant was appointed as a local school governor. In these community roles the church plant members attended as members of the plant rather than as individuals. The plant is seen as a long term community project and has been running now for four years, over which time 500-600 names have been added to a list of church plant contacts. Thirty-five people with no Adventist background are currently involved with Bible Study and approximately twenty people now regularly attend house churches. People are experiencing Christianity first and Adventism second. Christianity is being promoted at the level of the local community, not the level of the Adventist Church, and the results are now being seen. To date there have not been any baptisms of totally non-churched people, but that is not to say that there will not be any in the future. The community is being shown Christ at their level in areas which are of interest and concern to them.

Following the radical change in makeup of the main church membership, church services were no different, the upbeat worship style remained. Social activities, such as pancake evenings and church barbeques were difficult though, as the attendance dropped significantly following the influx of immigrant members. These kinds of traditional British social events did not appeal to the now majority of the membership. Sabbath afternoon services were dominated by singing hymns from the *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, which just did not appeal to many of us. The pace of church life became slower. It was difficult for church services to start and end on time, which was something we were not used to and which began to detract from the reverence of the church as the structure of the worship hour was slowly being eroded away.

Reverence was also an issue as there would be many comings and goings throughout the main Sabbath services, something we had brought our children up not to do. Overall we began to get very little out of attending on a Sabbath morning. It was becoming harder to maintain our British identity and to actually get a Sabbath blessing from Sabbath worship. Slow slurred hymn singing, impromptu readings, testimonies, and a lack of reverence just did not appeal to us.

My eldest daughter and her fiancé had begun to worship in a smaller church further away from our home each Sabbath. They had decided that they needed to attend a church where they could relate to the worship services and the members.

Then about a year later my husband and my youngest daughter decided that they too were going to move to the same church where they would receive a Sabbath blessing. What about me. I was a serving elder with responsibility for the ladies of the church; initially I did not feel I could leave the congregation where I was serving God. However after about six months, I knew that I too needed to leave and worship in a church where
I could be receiving rather than just giving and where I could be with my family on Sabbath mornings.

It was not an easy decision to make, but I realized that I was becoming increasingly negative about God’s cosmopolitan church, possibly because I felt aggrieved that it was not the church where we originally worshipped. The church had moved on, but maybe I hadn’t or indeed did not want to.

Sometimes we have to ask ourselves whether we are actually witnessing to the local community in which our churches are located, or are we a hindrance. In a city which is made up of predominantly White British, what effect is a predominantly African church having on the neighborhood in which it is situated? Do we make any attempt to witness to the neighbors at their level or do we expect them to be at our level and only then are we prepared to accept them into our fellowship?

And what about traditional Christmas and Easter Services? These form part of the calendar of mainstream denominations in the UK. When we first moved to the sleepy little church on the South Coast of England, we invited the church neighbors to Christmas and Easter Programs and some did come, particularly to the traditional English Carol Service. There were no debates about whether it was the right thing to hold such a service in an Adventist Church. As far as we were concerned we had a captive audience and we were going to make the most of the witnessing opportunity it presented.

We also held Vacation Bible Schools which were well attended by children in the community and friends of church members. This presented another witnessing opportunity.

That was then, but what of now? It was sad to see that last Christmas the church was barely half full for the Carol Service. What does the local community actually know about the church, other than the fact that there are a lot of comings and goings on Saturday, making car parking sometimes difficult?

In every community there needs to be give and take. We need to be accepting of change but at the same time those coming into our community also need to accept that they too need to be accepting of change as well. If we are to reach the un-churched, we need to do so at their level, not ours. Jesus himself reached people where they were, not where he thought they needed to be. For example, when Jesus went to the woman at the well, he did not initially preach to her about the wrongs of being a prostitute, instead he accepted her where she was and then moved her forward in her thinking.

Maybe that is what we need to do as a church. Sadly in many parts of the UK the Adventist Church is not seen as a church in which White indigenous members are involved.
Let’s not forget though, that despite not feeling comfortable inviting un-churched people to worship on a Sabbath morning with us, there are other opportunities which present themselves throughout our daily lives to witness for Jesus. In *Gospel Workers* Ellen White states that “a kind, courteous Christian is the most powerful argument that can be produced in favor of Christianity” (1948:122). A few years ago I worked with a lady who had been diagnosed as having breast cancer. This was a very difficult time for this lady for obvious reasons. This was someone I had worked closely with for a couple of years, but not someone who felt the need for religion, not something she ever wanted to talk about either. However, when she told me that she was ill and would need treatment, she asked me to pray for her as she thought that “my prayers would reach the right place, whereas hers would not get above the ceiling.” Despite never having what we would like to think of as being a real witnessing opportunity, this lady knew that I was an active Christian and in her time of need, asked for help. I am happy to say that prayers were answered and that she is now in a good state of health. When the opportunity presented itself, I did tell her that I had said a special prayer for her, for which she was most grateful. However this is as far as it went. Maybe in the future she will look back at this particularly bad time for her and remember our conversation. Do we sometimes expect too much too soon? We need to make the most of each opportunity as presented to us and then let the Holy Spirit do the rest.

Unfortunately the impact of immigration on the Adventist Church in the UK is having a huge impact on evangelizing the White British members of the population (whether we like to admit it or not). Cultural barriers are being built around the walls of many of our churches which are difficult to break down. Many once regular White British Adventist members do not attend church anymore, not because they no longer accept Adventist doctrines, but because they cannot relate to the church culture. There have been many discussions around this subject in the past, but we appear to be out of our depth in knowing how to fulfill Jesus’ words in Matt 24:14, “And this good news of the kingdom (the Gospel) will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then will come the end” (Amplified Bible). We need to make the most of the opportunities presented to us in our daily lives and allow the Holy Spirit to do the rest. Jesus has worked it out for us thus far and we need to trust in him that he will work it out so that all will have the opportunity to be saved regardless of race or culture.
Works Cited


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