

MEANINGFUL INTEGRATION

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Our town was almost exclusively white, but, thank God, things are gradually changing and the black and ethnic minority community now make up some 3% of the population. This has had an impact on our church, with the result that more than 25 Africans (none of whom knew one another previously) together with their children attend our services. The question then arises: 'How we can help our new friends to integrate fully into church life?' The first step is making the effort to get to know names. This has proved quite a challenge because their names sound unfamiliar – but surely what has been true for 'us', has been true for 'them'! Thankfully, we are now past the 'us' and 'them' stage – friendships have developed and a good number have become church members. But, because the British churches have had a bad record of integrating people from other cultures, it seems to me that we – the white majority – need to ensure that our churches are truly inclusive. For just as an all-male diaconate is a contradiction of the Gospel, so too in a multi-cultural setting is an all-white diaconate. I am looking forward to the day when we will have our first African deacons. In the meantime we have co-opted an African couple onto our pastoral team, with a special brief for caring for their fellow Africans, so that when new African people come to our church, they are followed up by people 'of their own kind'. This may sound racist, but the reverse is the case. For in a white majority situation, where black people can feel insecure in relating to whites – it can make a real difference to be reassured by fellow Africans that they will be truly welcomed and valued. Of course, that welcome needs to go beyond a warm-handshake on a Sunday. Because many Africans moving into our town are lonely and are looking for friendship, it has been important to put on social activities to further the integration process. Some have had an African flavour. We have, for instance, already had two opportunities to sample West African cooking; a new mixed church football team has been formed; and future events include an African fashion show and the visit of a black Gospel choir. But integration requires more than friendship. Practical help in relation to jobs, education, health and housing is needed too. Because many Africans do not know how to access services and entitlements available to them, and as a result struggle unnecessarily, we have encouraged two of our African church members to set up a community resource centre on our church premises to help the disadvantaged, particularly among the black minority community, to become aware of the rights and benefits available to them.. Meaningful integration does take time and effort - but integration is what the Gospel requires.

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