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# Immigration and Evangelism in the British Union of Seventh-day Adventists

## Introduction

Immigration and its influence upon host nations present many vexing questions with both positive and problematic consequences. This is applicable to the immigrants as well as the host population. It is a fitting subject for a detailed and objective analysis of how it has worked out in the British Isles and Ireland in the past fifty years. This period has seen a totally indigenous White church transformed into an almost wholly immigrant church.

In the mid-1950s the British Union Conference membership was approximately 7,500 of which only a handful were non-indigenous. Incidentally, the worldwide membership of the church which also reached its one million mark in the mid-1950s was also largely composed of White members. The majority of these lived in the United States. Today, the Adventist Church worldwide and the British Church is mainly non-White. This development is a source of perplexity and joy to church leaders and members for a variety of reasons. Not the least of these is the lack of effective evangelism in the Western world. What follows relates to the situation of the church in the United Kingdom. The time provided to write this article did not allow for extended research. Nevertheless the following is factually relevant to the present time

## The Paradox of Church Growth

If it was possible to formulate and predict success there would be no failures. Predicting success in the area of church growth is no different from any other venture. The exception may be that with church growth “success” comes in varied and often surprising ways. A political crisis can result in people moving into a situation where decline is evident and reverse it. It is equally true that an economic situation may lead to immigration which devastates a healthy church.

Unlike success, failure, to a large degree can be predicted. A business selling snow to Eskimos is unlikely to be successful.

The human capacity for self-deception and delusion is extensive; one might say it is inexhaustible. When the mind is captive to fixed ideas, acceptance of different, fresh, or new viewpoints does not come easily. Even with a willingness to be open to differences, embracing other points of view remains a problem. Yet it is a reality often ignored. Issues which are not addressed are never resolved.

Having participated, observed, and ministered in the territory of the British Union for over half a century, one arrives at some understanding of its development, growth, decline, and changing character over this period.

In an effort to avoid expressing a purely personal perspective I drew up a series of questions for this article and contacted approximately fifty people ranging in age from 35 to 75. The group was mostly men; however, seven women were among the respondents. There were twelve lay persons, eight church administrators, and thirteen pastors who responded. Roughly 50 percent were Black and 50 percent White. Thirty percent of the responses were received through personal interviews, while the rest came as responses to questionnaires sent out through the post. The responses were diverse. With some questions, answers indicated there was a high level of agreement, with others considerable differences emerged. What came across without qualification was a felt concern among the respondents concerning the decline of the White membership and how a witness to the majority indigenous population might be addressed. This concern expressed a deep anxiety by both indigenous and immigrant leaders and members and is really an anxiety for the future of the Church.

### **The Questions**

*1. Do you think all immigrants who were Seventh-day Adventists maintained their membership when they came to the United Kingdom?*

There was total agreement that a significant number of baptized members did not join the church on arrival in the United Kingdom. No reasons were suggested as to why this was the case. It is an area which may be worth investigating, to discover the numbers involved and possible reasons for a failure to unite with the local churches.

*2. In your understanding has immigration been a significant factor in evangelistic outreach?*

There is a clear recognition that immigrant members who joined the local churches were very successful in evangelistic outreach and in stimulating evangelism. One respondent said they brought with them a "missionary gene" which motivates them to witness for their faith.

Though the immigrant witness was to all classes of society their effectiveness was limited to their own people. One administrator reflected that when he influenced White people to worship at a local church, invariably they did not return due to the mainly Black membership. The exceptions were when the membership had a significant White presence.

It is interesting to note that while the evangelistic growth was among immigrant people, the preachers initially were mainly White.

Another dynamic which was stimulating evangelistic outreach, apart from immigration, was the successful visit of the George Vandeman's evangelistic team in the 1950s in London. Many indigenous pastors were inspired to follow his methods. They adopted them and conducted successful evangelism among the local populations in towns and cities throughout the country.

It appears that evangelistic outreaches in the mid-1950s until the early 1970s were having success among indigenous and immigrant groups. The greater success among the immigrant population led to the eclipse of the former.

We can say immigration stimulated evangelism but it was not a new drive. It gave added impetus to an already strong evangelistic outreach by White leaders and pastors. We might describe it as two rivers in parallel: one drying up, the other increasing in momentum.

This question stimulated a variety of other observations and points of view, some of which were contradictory. This indicates that vastly different perspectives exist in many minds in understanding the relationship of immigration and evangelism.

The following questions and statements were made: "Immigration has caused the decline in White churches." "Non-Seventh-day Adventist Churches have declined who had no Black immigration influxes. Examples: Methodists, Catholics, Anglicans." "Would the White churches have grown without immigration?" "Without immigration White decline would have happened anyway."

Various suggestions to support the different points were made. They will be referred to later in this article.

*3. Do you think immigration is at the present time making evangelism difficult?*

The responses to this question pinpoint the complexity and perplexity of viewpoints which exist among the respondents. Some of the comments made were separate from immigration altogether.

Initially, immigration was largely from the West Indies. In the past fifteen years immigration has become more diverse, complex, and extensive. Immigrants from Africa, Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Philippines have added more ingredients to the pot. The result, different cultures have a

definite tendency to segregate people or uniting like with like or as it was observed immigration tends to “validate the Homogeneous Unit Principle.”

Respondents gave a mixture of views which indicate a degree of tentativeness in answering the question. There is a wide agreement that contemporary evangelism is difficult. Immigrant evangelism to like-minded people presents no major problem other than to those normally involved in soul winning. The exception is that immigrants from Africa attract like-minded people from their own background. They do not reach Eastern European immigrants or West Indies people. Those who are winnable respond to those with whom they feel most at home.

Evangelism to indigenous people is hampered by the perception of White people in a local community that Seventh-day Adventism is a Black church. This appears to act as an inhibitor, discouraging any possible interested person from investigating the beliefs of the church or what it stands for. If people cross the immigrant barrier then the additional requirement to accept a different religious belief and the cultural change required decreases the likelihood of them embracing the Seventh-day Adventist faith.

The step to move from a secular, atheistic outlook, to faith in a church that has a biblical creationist understanding, which they think is contradicted by science, is considered a step too far.

Pastors, particularly White pastors, are discouraged with the composition of the membership, causing them to feel inadequate, or lack the faith to engage in large scale public evangelism among the indigenous population.

The increasing emphasis upon Internet and Media type evangelism is in general having a negative influence on evangelism. These approaches “debilitate ordinary people from making natural witness to natural people.” In essence they are replacing the idea of person-to-person outreach and witness.

Other observations included the problem of evolutionary teaching in schools, an immoral society, and the extreme views among some church members about end time issues and legalistic theology.

Without exception, the overall feeling is that the prospect for outreach and witness to the indigenous population is gloomy at best, and discouraging in reality. This goes beyond the issue of immigration, but is seen as growing out of it.

4. *If, as appears to be the case, none or few White young men are offering themselves for ministry: how do you see ministry for White churches and evangelism to indigenous people developing?*

The seriousness of this problem was clearly recognized by administrators and lay members. Responses had an element of hopelessness if not

despair. The implication is a diversity of pastoral oversight.

One respondent sounded a note of realism, suggesting it is unlikely that in the future there will be churches which are wholly indigenous.

Reasons for youth not offering themselves for ministry include: "Lack of strong role models does not make ministry an attractive life option." "As a community we have failed to pass on to the next generation who and what we are as Seventh-day Adventists and our mission in the world." This perspective had a strong resonance with older members who have difficulty with modern worship behavior.

White pastors from South Africa and Eastern Europe are in part meeting the current pastoral difficulties. This is a short-term solution. The theological education young people receive is not motivating them for pastoral or evangelistic ministry.

The most basic reason is the indigenous pool has dried up and the number of youth available for ministry has decreased.

*5. How do you see the future of the White membership in the British Union?*

The responses to this question with one exception were negative: The positive view was that White members will be those comfortable with diversity. They can celebrate their diversity and become beacons of inclusivity that are the pride of the nation. Weak social cohesion suggests there will be few wholly White congregations.

The perspectives of indigenous and immigrant respondents reflect a discouraging outlook.

"Bleak, unless significant changes are made." "Unless the Lord intervenes with some sort of radical initiative, or the national climate changes, the White church is unlikely to survive. Those dying are not being replaced." "No future." "A downward spiral." "Extinct in twenty years." "Does the present situation in some way expresses God's will? Is He speaking and we are not listening?"

A suggestion was to develop methods and witness outside of existing non-indigenous congregations. These could be house churches, cared for by suitable lay leaders and retired pastors. Lay members must take responsibility for White growth and not leave it all to the pastor.

*6. In your opinion, are there or have there been, other factors apart from immigration inhibiting evangelism to the indigenous population?*

This last question had responses which fell into two categories: those external to the church and those internal.

### **External Factors Affecting Outreach**

Respondents mentioned the following external factors that affect evangelism in the United Kingdom: "secularism," "people unsure about what is truth. There are many truths," "TV, materialism, and post modernism,"

and this interesting, candid and honest reflection:

“The main inhibitor to evangelism through Christianity is the non-reconciliation of the Bible interpretation with scientific interpretations of origins and the supernatural. We are wed to a belief system that we dare not be confident of. Eventually we will have to be candid about this.” Generally, the soil is perceived as mainly barren and unlike to produce fruit.

### **Internal Factors Affecting Outreach**

Respondents also mentioned several internal factors that affect evangelism: “the lack of conviction about our message and mission,” a “fear of failure,” “mediocre worship, preaching, hymn singing [that] . . . is unattractive,” the fact that “we have had easy church growth for 40 years—mainly due to immigration rather than evangelism, and we are reluctant to commit the resources in this area as we once did,” “we have changed from being a movement to an organization which is bureaucratic,” and “lack of visionary leadership.” One respondent suggested that there was “no accountability from ministry. Some pastors are not suitable for ministry but are allowed to continue in service.”

### **Evaluation**

It is fairly obvious that there is no clear cut dominant agreement on the relation of immigration to evangelism among those who responded to the six questions. Whatever the reality, one thing stands out, the situation relating to evangelism and the indigenous population is crying out to be addressed. The alternative is not to be contemplated.

Is there a realistic way forward? Can the situation be turned around? Are there pointers which suggest reversal is possible? What might be negative elements that would hold a reversal back? It is not difficult to ask the questions. However, often the right question can be a pointer to a solution and isolate areas of difficulty.

Christians are not always realistic yet they should be. Jesus had no time for wishful thinking and sentiment. He was factual, often with a directness which shattered compliancy. “Harm a child,” he said, “better you were never born.” “Follow me. Take up your cross.” The message is clear that God will not do for us what he has given us the power to do for ourselves.

This article is mostly descriptive. It has attempted to honestly reflect how a variety of administrators, lay people, and ministers, Black and White have responded to a series of questions. These may not be the right questions. They reflect a personal attempt to consider how immigration and evangelism is currently viewed by a significant number of thinking

people. The interchange of terms Black, White, indigenous, and immigrant is for variety and plainness. They contain no pejorative element.

Having been aware of unsuccessful efforts in the past to address the task of developing an evangelistic witness to the majority population in the British Union I am acutely aware of sensitive elements which have existed in various degrees among sincere leaders, pastors, and members, indigenous and immigrant. The present climate is in general mature and sincere, open to finding solutions which are in harmony with the will and purposes of our Heavenly Father, solutions which will respect all sections of the church membership.

In 1974 Dennis Porter, at the request of the British Union Conference, wrote a short history of the Adventist Church's hundred years since J. N. Andrews came to Britain. Porter wrote as a professional historian dealing with facts as he understood them. Quoting Oliver Cromwell's advice to the artist Lely, "paint me as I am, warts and everything included," he referred to a study of immigration by Rex and Moore who made a trenchant statement about the Seventh-day Adventist Church and West Indian immigration. They expressed their view in unvarnished language which requires a high level of maturity to digest. "West Indians," they said, "have come to predominate in the organization and the English have become a minority group. . . . We suspect that the beliefs of this sect and its predominant membership are so alien to the ordinary Englishman that it will not attract any more members" (Porter 1974:42).

This is a secular perspective which though it is unpalatable should not be dismissed out of hand, it is reflected in reality.

### Observations

While we cannot predict success we can do a lot to lessen the likelihood of failure. The following are reflections which have the possibility of moving things forward.

1. The Adventist Church must be open and mature to recognize that its present patterns of ministry, administration, and leadership are not solving the evangelistic issues.

2. The Church must involve the best and most creative minds in the British Union to meet and dialogue as to possible re-formations in ministry, administration, leadership, and witness.

3. Church leaders need to examine the Homogeneous Unit Principle as a reality of human behavior, which may influence outreach while at the same time respecting different perspectives.

4. We must accept that we are Seventh-day Adventists, honestly and openly commit ourselves to the truths inherent in our name and mission, and recognize that we are different from other Christians.

5. The Church must focus on witnessing and winning people of all classes, which is our primary reason for existing. The Church must also commit adequate resources to this end while recognizing that in order to reach the indigenous population specific approaches will be required.

6. The Church must admit and accept the fact that the existing patterns of pastoral ministry are largely unproductive. Fresh approaches such as team ministries, specific evangelistic efforts, greater accountability from ministry, and new approaches to attract youth into ministry are required.

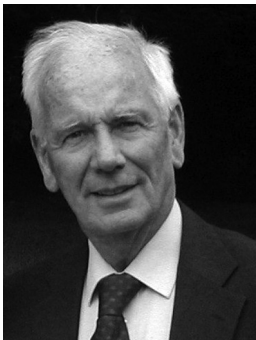
7. The Church must acknowledge that without God's blessing and guidance progress is unlikely. There needs to be an acknowledgment that the Church's failure in the past resulted from relying more on human thinking and wisdom than coming into harmony with God's revealed will and wholly depending on his blessing and guidance.

8. The church is a spiritual enterprise, it is driven by faith. All its activities are predicated and undertaken in faith that they will be successful.

The foregoing calls out for optimism and encouragement. No matter if the outlook may appear discouraging, the story of the church is God's story, and he is a God of surprises. Our frailty, failure, defeat, disappointment, and discouragement meet their solution in his power, success, victory, fulfillment, joy, and gladness. Jesus has committed himself and his church to ultimate success—it is our part to unite with him to this end.

### Works Cited

Porter, Dennis. 1974. *A Century of Adventism in the British Isles: A Brief History of the British Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists*. Grantham, UK: Stanborough Press.



Patrick Boyle is a retired pastor who has served in the British Union for more than forty years, as well as a couple of years as a pastor in New Brunswick, Canada. Most of his ministry has been in public evangelism, pastoral ministry, and six years in departmental work. Recently he has also collaborated with Dr. Børge Schantz in evangelism in Nigeria, Pakistan, and Sudan.