



PROJECT REPORT

SEPTEMBER 2021

THE HYPHEN PROJECT

Findings & Recommendations

The recommendations in this report were developed from the findings of *The Hyphen Project*, which was undertaken as part of The Edward Cadbury Centre for the Public Understanding of Religion at the University of Birmingham. These recommendations are aimed at leaders and members of churches whose leadership/congregation predominantly represent the cultural majority in Britain (White-British).¹ These recommendations are designed to inform policy and guidance in the areas of pastoral support for converts from other faiths, inter-faith engagement and mission. This report is intended to challenge and motivate White-British majority churches in the UK to engage in cultural reflection and reconciliation. My thanks go to the William Paton Fund for funding this project, to the members of the project's Advisory Board for their support and to the eleven participants who shared their stories so generously and commented on the analysis to help shape this report.

A note about language: 'Conversion' is a term which can be problematic as it holds colonial connotations within a British Christian context of historical forced conversions and of overseas mission activities. The word conversion in Christianity also connotes a complete movement from one faith to another and does not always allow for hyphenated religious identities (such as Messianic Judaism). During the course of *The Hyphen Project* it was decided to use alternative phrases such as 'deciding to follow Jesus' or 'coming to faith in Jesus'. However, for the sake of this report the more common terms *convert* and *conversion* are used throughout. Please note that the use of these words is intended in an open way which allows for a wide spectrum of conversion experiences and does not assume a complete break with one's past.²

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A. CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY INVOLVES ELEMENTS OF CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY BETWEEN ONE'S PRE-CHRISTIAN CONTEXT AND THEIR CHRISTIAN LIFE. THESE ARE UNIQUE TO EACH INDIVIDUAL.

This experience of continuity and discontinuity is not always recognised or represented in teachings and approaches to religious conversion in churches. This is particularly true in church traditions which hold conversion to involve a dramatic and/or sudden transformation.

The theological language used around conversion in UK churches can at times be misinterpreted or misrepresented. For example, the theology of being born again is a central part of many Christian denominations and the transformational change that is possible through Christ is one aspect of the faith that can be very appealing to people. The miraculous outworking of this theology should not be downplayed, however an emphasis on complete transformation at conversion can lead to a kind of subsuming of difference in an attempt to 'look' and 'act' more like a 'British Christian' (otherwise known as assimilation).

Assimilation to one cultural expression and subsuming of difference misses the beautiful, diverse vision of the Kingdom as 'every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb' (Rev. 7:9). An unexamined emphasis on 'new birth' or being a 'new creation' as a total transformation, can put pressure on converts from other faiths and minority ethnic groups to reject or downplay their cultural and previous religious identities.

Furthermore, this focus on sudden and dramatic change whereby the 'old life' is gone, does not recognise the current sociological and psychological literature which emphasise that conversion takes place along a spectrum and over a period of time - even though there may be a moment of decision. In recognising that conversion takes place over time, it is important to note that this process of balancing cultural and religious identities also does not end with a commitment or baptism. Furthermore, the balance of identities may occasionally result in a combination or hybridity between different faiths (Messianic Judaism for example) which is not always recognised within mainstream churches.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Church leaders and Mission organisations should ensure that their language about conversion and converts actively recognises the fact that there will be areas of continuity and discontinuity for all believers. This developing, holistic understanding of conversion should be reflected in the theological language used about conversion.
2. Individual Christian ministries need to think about their discourse on conversion across all departments. This applies as much for the discipleship, pastoral care, children's work and youth work, as it does for mission, evangelism and inter-faith relations.

B. CONVERTS FROM OTHER FAITHS OFTEN HAVE TO UNDERGO A PROCESS OF IDENTITY FORMATION WHEREBY THEY NEGOTIATE THE BALANCE AND RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEIR CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES.

This process involves deciding which aspects of their cultural identity/ies to engage with or reject in their Christian context (e.g. clothing, name, practices) and which relationships to continue and how (e.g. family, friends, community). Converts from other faiths often have to make decisions during times of life stage transition as to whether or not to engage in religious practices to celebrate with their families. For example, a number of participants in *The Hyphen Project* expressed concern at the thought of their parents' eventual deaths as they were not sure whether they would be able to/want to participate in non-Christian funeral rituals. This internal process involves weighing up which aspects of one's identity are considered to be compatible with Christianity. There are internal (emotional, spiritual, personal) as well as external (familial, community, religious) pressures on these individuals to honour their loved ones but also to do the 'right thing' as a Christian.

In order to learn more about their new faith and to assist in discerning the way that they should live as Christians, converts from other faiths often have to learn about the scriptures and doctrines of their particular denomination from scratch with little or no previous knowledge. This is particularly true if their upbringing did not involve any input of Christian teaching or stories, such as in school.

Many of the participants in *The Hyphen Project* were left to undertake this work on their own. A lack of support can stem from an assumption that negotiating the differences between cultural and religious identities is only something that affects UKME Christians. Therefore, UK majority culture leaders may not be equipped to support a new Christian through this process or even recognise when support is needed.

However, all Christians are influenced by their culture and their religion and these identities shape how and what they believe. For Christians who belong to the majority culture, this influence is often taken for granted and assumed to be the 'norm' of the Christian faith. This leads to a perpetuation, in some quarters of some Christian traditions, of the myth that White British Christianity is the standard against which Christianity is to be measured.

The survival of this myth displays a lack of awareness of the transformations we have been seeing in the UK in recent decades towards declining White-British congregations on the one hand and flourishing African diaspora congregations, on the other. In light of the vitality that African and other UKME Christians are injecting into the national picture of the Church, the continuation of the myth that White British Christianity should be the 'norm' in the 21st Century is unacceptable. However, it often continues because of the segregation along racial lines that is present across UK congregations. Majority culture churches, even in multicultural contexts, can be removed from Christian expressions other than their own in terms of their membership, leadership structure and the exclusion of UKME voices in preaching, worship and teaching. For converts from other faiths within these churches, it can be difficult to find out about the diverse global expressions of Christianity that are present in the UK.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is a need for active reflection and institutional education on cultural and religious identity for all Christians.³ There must be reflection and action surrounding the cultural aspects of individual churches and wider organisations, as well as differentiating between theological and cultural expectations of congregation members. This will necessarily involve critical reflection on issues of race and ethnic identity as well as a focus on identifying the ways that our cultural contexts influence our faith. This is something that should be emphasised and offered within Christian organisations.
2. Majority Culture church leaders should seek to engage and partner with local diaspora churches. Through shared resources, services, celebrations, building friendships and learning from Christians from different ethnic background, the diversity and vitality of the global Christian faith will be made more visible and normalised among all Christians in the UK.

C. THERE IS A LACK OF UNDERSTANDING AND ENGAGEMENT FROM WHITE-BRITISH MAJORITY CHURCHES AND CHRISTIAN ORGANISATIONS, WITH INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANISATIONS FROM DIFFERENT FAITHS.

Where there is a lack of genuine relationship and community between people of different faiths and cultures, those who belong to the majority culture can rely on stereotypes and generalisations about people who do not fit the White-British norms. This can lead to alienation or tokenism of converts from other faiths and cultures within majority culture churches.

Furthermore, there can be an assumptions that the individual convert is a representative of or expert on their cultural / religious background. When we hold assumptions and stereotypes about people's backgrounds it can impair our ability to listen and learn to find out the unique challenges faced, and gifts presented by each individual. This lack of understanding and education can also lead to the rejection of all aspects of other faiths out of fear of idolatry.

It was interesting to note that the assumption that Christianity is a 'white religion' was present among my respondents' families, as well as the concern that becoming Christian means to adopt White-British cultural norms. For example, one British-Asian participant's Sikh parents were concerned that her conversion to Christianity meant that she would 'end up wearing mini-skirts, smoking and sleeping around'. While White British Christians may dismiss these fears as extreme, some converts do feel the need to wear more 'Western' clothes and to act in ways that may be counter to their upbringing in order to feel accepted in majority culture churches.

Many of the larger UK denominations have documented inter-faith guidelines to encourage and guide their members in effective and respectful relationship with non-Christian faiths. This is to be encouraged. However, inter-faith engagement can be perceived as purely an evangelistic activity, even when the explicit aim is not to convert those with whom you are building relationships. There can be the assumption that inter-faith engagement is what happens outside of the church walls *before* someone becomes a Christian and upon conversion, inter-faith engagement ends.

However, if we take seriously Findings and Recommendations A and B, we must recognise that conversion to Christianity does not remove all internal or external influences and relationships a convert has with their previous faith. Inter-faith engagement does not end once someone has become a Christian.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Interfaith engagement should be a central part of church life wherever possible. This should be open, hospitable and not motivated by conversion. Inter-faith engagement and/or training should be an important part of discipleship and pastoral care within congregations as well as evangelism and mission.
2. Interfaith guidelines, at denominational and local level, should include guidelines for pastoral care and discipleship of converts from other faiths.

D. THERE IS A LACK OF UNDERSTANDING AND ENGAGEMENT BY WHITE-BRITISH MAJORITY CHURCHES WITH CONVERTS FROM OTHER FAITHS WITHIN THEIR CONGREGATIONS.

This lack of understanding and engagement can lead to isolation and additional burdens when managing conflicts alone. Conflicts can come from all areas of a convert's life; family, friends, churches, and from any faith. *The Hyphen Project* participants' stories are filled with examples of Christian men and women who supported and loved them through these conflicts. These actions have a lasting impact and significance. It is important to learn from these examples and to spread this hospitality and support throughout congregations rather than a few individuals.

The Church is called to be family to believers. This is even more crucial when a believer's own family connections have been severed or are strained. Times of major life change (e.g. marriage/ civil partnership, death of a loved one, welcoming a child etc) can be key areas where these conflicts emerge. Care and love must be shown with a particular understanding and willingness to listen during these times. It is important for any pastoral carer who is involved in the planning and delivery of life stage ceremonies or care around these times to actively listen to and support the needs and concerns of converts within their congregations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In order for church communities to build authentic friendships and provide a supportive family for Christians from other religious backgrounds, these churches must demonstrate openness, hospitality and a willingness to learn from other faiths and cultures other than White-British Christian (see recommendation C.1).
2. Where appropriate and in conjunction with the convert, reaching out to families of converts sensitively can help to remove some of the assumptions and stereotypes made by churches and families alike. This may take the form of offering new Christians and friends/family a tour of the church building and a discussion about how different aspects of the faith community and services operate.

3. Attention should be given by denominational training institutions and individual church leaders, as appropriate, to ensure that relevant leaders and pastoral carers are trained in “ritual creativity”. This means that they develop the ability and skills to think about traditional rituals in a fresh way and to be creative with adapting and transforming rituals to express a greater diversity of cultural needs.

ENDNOTES

¹ According to the 2011 Census data, 80.5% of the population of England and Wales identified as ethnically White British at this time. “Population of England and Wales” (GOV.UK Website, published August 2018. Updated 7 August 2020. [Available online <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest> Accessed 6th August 2021].

² *The Hyphen Project* holds to a model of conversion as a process which can last throughout the lifetime of a convert. See Lewis Rambo. *Understanding Religious Conversion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993 and Henri Gooren. *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practice*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, and Grace Milton. *Shalom, the Spirit and Pentecostal Conversion: a practical-theological study*. Leiden: Brill, 2015 for further reading on stage models of religious conversion.

³ See Appendix A for a list of resource recommendations for congregations.

APPENDIX

RESOURCE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONGREGATIONS

BOOKS AND COURSES

1. Aldous, Ben; Dunmore, Idina & Seevaratnam, Mohan. *Intercultural Church: Shared Learning from New Communities* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2021)
2. Arora, Arun; Barron, Sonia; Jeremiah, Anderson (et al.) *From Lament to Action: The report of the Archbishops' Anti-Racism Taskforce. Church of England* (2021) [available online: <https://churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/FromLamentToAction-report.pdf>]
3. Barrett, Al and Harley, Ruth. *Being Interrupted: Reimagining the Church's Mission from the Outside, In* (London: SCM Press, 2020)
4. Barton, Mukti. *Rejection, Resistance and Resurrection: Speaking out on Racism in the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005)
5. Green, Tim. & Roxy *Joining the Family: Welcoming Christ's Followers of Muslim Background into His Community* (Kitab – Interserve Resources: 2016)
6. Hussain, K. *Against the Grain: Story of a Muslim Background Believer*. (XLIBRIS, 2012)
7. Kwiyan, Harvey. *Multicultural Kingdom: Ethnic Diversity, Mission and the Church* (London: SCM Press, 2020)
8. Lindsay, Ben. *We Need to Talk About Race: Understanding the Black Experience in White Majority Churches*. (London: SPCK, 2019)
9. Olofinjana, Israel (ed) *World Christianity in Western Europe: Diasporic Identity, Narratives and Missiology*. (Oxford: Regnum, 2020)
10. Perera, Sanjee "Beyond the Lynch-gate: a Strategic Diagnostic of Church Culture and Practices that Marginalise and Disenfranchise Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic People in the Church of England" *Anglicanism.org*, (2020) [Available online: <https://anglicanism.org/beyond-the-lynch-gate-a-strategic-diagnostic-of-church-culture-and-practices-that-marginalise-and-disenfranchise-black-asian-minority-ethnic-people-in-the-church-of-england>]
11. Prentis, Sharon (ed) *Every Tribe: Stories of diverse saints serving a diverse world* (London: SPCK, 2019)
12. Rasiah, C & Thomson, R. *Notes for the Journey: Following Jesus, Staying South Asian* (Surrey: South Asian Concern, 2011)
13. Sandiford, Delbert. *Multiethnic Church: A Case Study of an Anglican Diocese* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2010)
14. Shah, H. *Imam's Daughter: Story of a Muslim Background Believer*. (London: Rider, 2010)
15. Smith, Andrew. *Vibrant Christianity in Multifaith Britain: equipping the church for faithful engagement with people of different faiths*. (Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2018)

16. Thorne, Clive & Thomson, Robin *Jesus Through Asian Eyes: 16 frequently asked questions about Jesus, life and faith in God* (Good Book Company, 2014)

UK DENOMINATIONAL RESOURCES

Baptist - https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/310744/Multicultural_Church.aspx

The Methodist Church - <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/building-relationships/inter-faith-relations/inter-faith-resources/>

Roman Catholic – Catholic Association for Racial Justice www.carj.org.uk

Church of England – <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/work-other-faiths/guidelines-church-leaders>

Evangelical Alliance - <https://www.eauk.org/great-commission/cross-cultural/resources>

United Reformed Church – <https://urc.org.uk/intercultural-resources.html>

GROUPS AND FORUMS

South Asian Forum of the Evangelical Alliance – www.southasianforum.co.uk

Anglican Minority Ethnic Network – www.amenanglican.org.uk

South Asian Concern - www.southasianconcern.org

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The Edward Cadbury Centre for the Public Understanding of Religion works with faith communities to promote innovative, interdisciplinary research at the junction of Theology and the Social Sciences in the fields of global politics, public policy and civic life.

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