

Week 1: Lived Experiences – Jacqueline Stobar (transcript)

When I graduated from university I knew I had a vocation to ministry, but in those days a woman's options were limited; you could be a missionary, a nun or a deaconess. It may not seem like much of a choice to us now – for one thing deaconesses weren't allowed to marry either – but back then our ambition as women was to campaign to become deacons. Being a deacon was a totally different role you see; ordination to the diaconate, for men, was usually the precursor to priesthood one day.

I weighed up the odds and realised that, though I could probably go off, study theology, and join other women in the struggle to be accepted as a deacon and beyond, doing so whilst Black would utterly defeat me, so I didn't even try. The good news is that when, many years later I did respond to the call, I was sent directly for selection to the priesthood. So I am incredibly grateful to those women, including our own Bishop Libby, who fought that fight on my behalf.

In those days they used to keep statistics on the ethnicity of people presenting for training. Out of a total of 637 candidates in 2003, there were only 9 who were ethnically diverse. Most of these people were from overseas: there was only one UK Black, and that was me.

I grew up in a relatively prosperous part of Liverpool. You know that snippet on channel 4 where there are children in the street kicking a ball with a giant number 4? That street corner was on my way to school, but in those days we were the only Black¹ people around; I was also the only Black child at school, but I was taken by a neighbour to Sunday school in the Toxteth area where there were dozens of children of all ethnicities hearing about the love of Jesus from the age of four onwards.

I remember noticing even as a child that, as the children got older there was a significant drop off in numbers. My older sister left in a huff when she was ten years old and never went to church regularly again.

She told me recently what had happened; when she offered to help with the younger children, she was told that being a Sunday school teacher was not for children like her, so she left and never went back.

I stayed on because after the top Sunday School class came a club for secondary school pupils called Pathfinders. Having pledged my life to God when I was nine years old I was keen to continue my faith journey, but for some reason I never got an invitation to join, so instead I got involved with various ecumenical youth groups and Christian Unions across the city, but I only ever knew one other young Black person who stayed engaged with the church of any denomination. As it happens he is still an Anglican churchgoer in Glossop.

¹. 'Black' is a social construct not a descriptor of skin colour, so it is often used to include minorities other than those of African origin. To avoid confusion, the term 'Global Majority' is often used, but as I am writing about the past, I am using the terminology commonly used then.

But the question is, when there is a significant Black population, why were we so low profile? Why was the church only there for us as children? Had there been a subtle series of obstacles placed in our way, things I'd been oblivious to, but which had deterred more sensitive people as they'd matured?

Why was it that even when I was ordained a curate, I was the only paid minority priest in a diocese which had a significant minority population? Same in my next diocese, same in this one for the first three years.

So when I was training for ordination and had to choose a subject for my dissertation I decided that I wanted to explore what was happening.

So I based my research on a questionnaire, interviewed the very small group of Black priests from across the country that I could find, and compared them with the mostly white ordinands I was training with.

I asked people things like their experience of Sunday school, how active were they in their parish church, the length of time it took them to realise they had a vocation, what were the barriers, who had encouraged them?

I discovered a series of stories and observations that resonated with my own experiences. The overall consensus was that the church had been massively challenging for them to gain even a welcome, let alone a foothold.

As a cradle Anglican, when I got my first teaching job and moved to a new village, I was greeted by one vicar's wife who said, I do love you people, but I think you might be more comfortable in the Pentecostal church in town. Thanks for that!

I'll tell you three people's stories on that theme.

A young person:

After hearing a notice inviting people to join the church drama group one young man went forward, having enjoyed literature at school. When he turned up to rehearsal there was a conversation about some people needing to have a police check. He looked around nervously for the dodgy person: who did they mean? When he realised that they meant him, he left.

An accountant:

One man was a certified accountant. When he heard that his church was looking for a new treasurer, he stepped forward and volunteered. He was thanked, but his offer was declined. The vicar continued to look for a new treasurer.

A teacher:

When my daughter was young, but she suddenly became reluctant to go to Sunday school; I don't know why, children don't always need a reason, so when the children left during the sermon I'd go with her, hoping it was temporary and that she'd soon settle in again.

The teachers had obviously run the Sunday school since their children were little, many years ago, and like a lot of nice Anglicans, they just didn't know how to say no to the vicar!

As a primary school teacher I couldn't help but intervene, joining in conversations with the children, suggesting activities related to the lesson. After a few weeks I was firmly told that I was only there as my daughter's mother and would I please not contribute to the discussions.

Fair enough, I should have kept my undiplomatic mouth shut, but I'd felt sorry for them because they were clearly burnt out.

Anyway, since I'd originally trained as a high school teacher I was still looking for some way to contribute. I thought I'd found it in youth group.

My son sang in the choir, and when his voice broke I encouraged him to join our youth group, designed to keep the boys engaged in church until their voices had settled down and they could join the men's choir. It was nothing fancy, just table tennis in the church hall and lots of sweets and pop. A friend and I took our boys along and offered to help. As their sons were now grown, the existing leaders were grateful and offered to step down if we'd like to run it. We agreed, but when he heard about this the vicar simply closed the group down...

Our stories are disturbing because they demonstrate those in church leadership acting as gatekeepers, not just discouraging us from feeling fully a part of the church community, also having the - I presume - unintended consequence of stopping people from gaining the skills and experience needed to develop into ministry should an opportunity arise.

Even more concerning, there is also an underlying assumption that we are untrustworthy, perhaps even a safeguarding risk, and ought to be treated as such.

That is terribly destructive because those expectations affect not just the way you are treated by the church as an institution, and by the people you encounter, but it also affects your own sense of self-worth, how valued you feel as a precious child of God, or not.

So several years after ordination, when I decided to do an MA, I was gratified that the national church by now had increased our numbers somewhat, but there's a phrase which is used in the NHS: Snowy White Peaks. While there were increasing numbers of Black and Asian clergy in the foothills, the road to leadership within the church was as challenging as ever and more than most can aspire to: many priests of colour are encouraged to work for free, or in a chaplaincy paid by someone else (prison or hospital chaplaincy), or as associate priests not really welcomed as Vicar nor encouraged to step up into senior leadership in the national church.

So encouraged by Bishop Alastair, I decided that again I would interview those clergy who had successfully negotiated those obstacles and moved into senior leadership in the church. This was as recently as 2018.

Across the country there were only 9 Black or brown clergy in Who's Who, you could count them on the fingers of your hands. So I interviewed them all except one.

Interestingly these people didn't tend to dwell on their incapacitating experiences but tended to shake their heads and chuckle at people's narrow-mindedness. One person criticised my last question saying,

The church shouldn't be described as White or Black because the church of God is universal: to start with, Jesus was not a white man, the disciples weren't white, the founding fathers of the church were not white Europeans...

I wanted to know, what were their stories? What were the obstacles they had faced? What helped them to flourish? Someone said,

'I love the church, it is a church that has not always treated its minorities with respect, and we've had to fight our way to say we belong. And it's tiring sometimes, but we say it because of the gospel. We say it and we live it: we belong because of the gospel.'

So did anyone get it right? All my senior clergy mentioned having role models or mentors. One said,

My sense of calling emerged through my parish priest...somebody who had a real heart for the poor folk who lived in the parish and on occasions he would take me with him to go and visit these families, and I was very moved by all of that, and that began to stir something up within me...

...I felt a light shining and I thought, "I could do that".

Finally, in answer to my last question one of my respondents got really excited. The question was, how could clergy of colour contribute to the future mission of the church. She said,

'We bring enthusiasm and conviction, taking seriously the fact that we are no longer a monocultural community but that we are very diverse, bringing on board huge energy and vitality and people with conviction and, yeah! It would be a new, vibrant church.'

So there you have it. Let's hope this little learning community/book can contribute to the way forward. In the years since my dissertation was written there has been a lot of change in the church, and there are many Black and Asian priests, men and women, and more than nine clergy in senior leadership.

That's the challenge and the blessing that we bring: change and the opportunity to grow a new energetic, vibrant church, a church that visibly reflects the joyful diversity of our communities in terms of gender, ethnicity, disability.

Because that's what will draw people to us, and to Christ; an invitation that says genuinely Come, all are welcome here.
