

A conversation with Rev Mandy Ralph, minister at Annbank and Tarbolton, South Ayrshire.

Recently my friend Mandy has been speaking about racism and Black History Month including [It's a Fair Question](#) with Martin Fair and a piece on the Church of Scotland [website](#).

I asked her “*what would you want to say to your colleagues around racism, diversity and equality – what first comes to mind?*”

“Racism is a reality in Scotland not just in other parts of the country or specific to America. People are being treated unfairly and abused because of the colour of their skin here. As ministers we need to be able to have open discussions about race, not just with other colleagues, but with our Elders and members of our congregation. We need to preach about inclusion, diversity, and racial awareness. We must live by that in our parishes, our jobs.

We need to be more aware of the images we portray from our bible passages as these images shape our perception of faith as we know it. Jesus was from the Middle East and therefore unlikely to be the blond haired, blue eyed, pale skinned man often seen portrayed in religious imagery. The great theologian St Augustine was black. We need to show an honest portrayal of the culture and heritage of our people and our faith.

Ask yourself, how diverse is my parish? How diverse is my congregation? Do you know? Are you aware of how to find that out? Just because you might see only white faces in the pews or seats, doesn't mean that the same goes for your parish, or indeed the families of those sitting in your congregation. Am I creating an inclusive, welcoming space for worship?”

We have this category BAME (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) – what does that say to you? It says to me that there are actually two groups of people categorized by skin colour – white people and ‘The other’. Those in the BAME group are all lumped together – grouped by the one defining factor – that we are not white. Within that category there are a myriad of different cultures. So, what does being shoehorned into BAME mean? It means I have been stripped of my complex and multi layered heritage and given this one-dimensional new identity of ‘not being white’. Defined by an understanding of what I am not – a negative characteristic – rather than all that I am. Black is a term afforded to people in this country and America especially. People who come from Ghana are Ghanaian, from Kenya are Kenyan, they are not termed as black until they hit our shores and then that's what they become known as. I am black and Scottish but to most people I am just black and constantly queried if I am in actual fact Scottish.

What do your congregants think about black people? If the only exposure your congregation has is from an international Faithshare perspective, then you could be perpetuating the lie that all black people are poor. What about black culture in the UK? What do you know of that? Of the history that surrounds your communities, that surrounds the Church of Scotland and its links to the slave trade?

When it comes to racism, yes it can be an uncomfortable subject to tackle but that doesn't mean we should avoid it. We have to own it. We must be aware of our own biases. We have to understand that racism is nasty and it is chronic, it eats away at people's self-esteem, their well-being, their health and their confidence. Whether badged up as a joke, as satire, as a throw away comment, it's still racist.

When you sigh and mutter about statues being removed and extra plaques added, complain about programmes or songs, think about the hurt and pain that causes others and the indifference to their suffering it shows.

When you sit back and say nothing when another is being racially abused or take the tack that it is nothing to do with you - well reality check - it is about you and your silence is deafening.

When you take the superior attitude that you know better, then be gracious and understand that when you do that, unless you have walked a mile in that person's shoes, you don't know better.

And my final request, please stop telling people ‘you are not racist because you have a black friend!’ How insulting to your black friend, as if somehow through association or osmosis that gets you off the hook! Because if you ever feel the need to say that phrase then my point is made!

If you are interested then I would suggest starting with these five books:

Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race by Reni Eddo-Lodge. (Wow! She just says it all. Wow!)
How To Argue With A Racist by Adam Rutherford

Is God Colourblind?: Insights From Black Theology For Christian Ministry by Anthony G. Reddie.

We Need To Talk About Race: Understanding the Black Experience in White Majority Churches by Ben Lindsay

Ghost Ship: Institutional Racism and the Church of England by Fr. Azariah France-Williams

In conversation with Hannah Sanderson