

## St Christopher's Walworth

Arriving early for my meeting I took a seat in a side room. Everything was ordered in a way that told me this was a Christian worship space. The statue of the patron saint in dark wood and African features was clearly St Christopher. The weekly sheet of readings, prayers and notices had a picture of Jesus calling the disciples from their fishing, though the boats and the faces of the fishermen were not the usual clip art fare. The altar covering was clearly not out of Vanpoules. Here was a reflection of church that was not exclusively white English Anglicanism.



The Revd Mark Williams (who has since moved to be Vicar of St John the Divine Kennington) told me that when he had arrived in the parish the congregation was small, mainly elderly and although mixed did not reflect the wider parish which is 50% West African. Simple changes had enabled the worship to become a tool for mission.

*It was Candlemas 2001 when we first sang in a language other than English – the organist had disappeared to the toilet during the sharing of the Peace, and was still there as we were ready to sing the Offertory hymn. A member of the congregation and her sister were to bring the bread and the wine to the altar, and she took the initiative of bursting into song in Yoruba. The song, was 'O se o Jesu', 'we thank you Jesus', and was one that sounded strangely familiar, and which we could hum along to. It was in fact a traditional African song, which accompanies the Jamaican children's game 'Brown girl in the ring', and had been set by the pop group Boney-M in the late 70s. The convergence of all these elements for a congregation made up of people from West Africa, the Caribbean, and faded white disco dancers was quite extraordinary.*

The pattern developed of singing something in a home language of the community every other week, using hand drums for the Gloria, Sanctus and some of the hymns roughly once a month. Special birthdays or anniversaries afford opportunities for thanksgiving offerings accompanied by music and procession African style.

When I met with Mark he was preparing for a trip to West Africa with other Southwark clergy to learn more about the cultures represented in his congregation. Opening up worship to enable people to be themselves and express who they are helps to build a confident Christian identity. Common cultural bonds enable exchanges of hospitality and friendships with the local mosque.

## Resources

The quote in the text box is taken from the **"Promised Land; Creating a space for diversity to thrive"** a report published by the Diocese of Southwark's Minority Ethnic Anglican Concerns Committee and the Diocesan Liturgical Committee (and available from the MEACC office in [Trinity House](#)).