

REFLECTION

My prayer is that the “helpful” sorting out of people will cease

BY PAUL MUGARURA

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED



Paul Mugarura and his wife Evelyn lead Sunday afternoon worship services with Archdeacon Mark Whittall at Trinity Anglican Church in Ottawa.

I am a direct beneficiary of the extraordinary efforts of Anglican missionaries to spread the gospel around the world. The Anglican Church established itself as the dominant Christian denomination in Uganda in the late 1800s and early 1900s. My father is a retired Anglican priest, and I grew up in the Anglican Church and went to a Christian boarding school, Kings College Budo that was set up by missionaries in 1906 in Kampala.

When I graduated from high school and went to university, I plugged into St. Francis Chapel, the church at which my father was chaplain. I served and attended there until I left to come to Canada. St Francis was a fascinating congregation. We had loud and expressive music, vibrant liturgy, and a culturally diverse and multigenerational congregation.

My identity as a Christian and as an Anglican was deeply entrenched when I came to Canada in 2003, so naturally, the first congregations that I tried to find connections with were Anglican.

My transition to Canada was not easy. I struggled to find work. I was a computer programmer and 2003 was a terrible time for somebody with my qualifications to show up in Ottawa. Adjusting to the culture was very difficult. On the surface, everybody was very polite and, at times, helpful, but it was incredibly difficult to make friends or lasting connections because the only way to penetrate the veneer of politeness and make actual connections is through personal introductions into social circles. If you're new to Canada, you know how difficult those are to come by.

I went to the church hoping it would be different. The assumption that I came to Canada with was that, even though I did not have my biological family with me, I would be able to build family with my spiritual family. What I found was the same polite smiles and occasional helpfulness, but no real connection.

One Sunday, I decided to take the initiative. I had been sitting behind a couple that had politely shared the peace with me and had smiled or given a polite nod when we made eye contact. I introduced myself and told them a little about my story and how I had ended up in Ottawa and at their congregation. When I was done, the gentleman said something to me which he must have thought was helpful.

“You know what congregation you would really like,” he said, “You’d

really like the Baptist church down the road.”

I found his response to our conversation quite confusing. I did not know what to make of it and so I just shrugged it off. Weeks later, I left that congregation and started attending another when I moved house. I spent a few months at this second congregation, and my experience was the same. I had the same polite smiles and numerous similar suggestions to try out different congregations that they thought I would really like.

Eventually, I took the suggestions of my well-meaning acquaintances and tried out different churches. I attended and worked at a Baptist Church. Following that, I attended and worked at a Pentecostal church. My wife and I planted a church with the Free Methodists. And right before the pandemic hit, I was asked to help out part-time in a transitional role at the first Baptist church that hired me in the early 2000s. During my tour of the other denominations, I found more and more people like myself—people who had come to Canada as Anglicans and had been “helpfully” ushered out the door by seemingly well-meaning people who genuinely thought that they would like another church better.

At Synod in 2022, I shared my story as we discussed the proposal to start new worshipping communities in the diocese. After the session, five people who had immigrated to Canada over the years told me that they had had the same experience. What initially seemed unusual turns out to be

rather commonplace. I think that should trouble us.

The Anglican Church is a global communion, and as an increasing number of people like myself from other parts of the world choose to make Canada their new home, they are likely to try to find a spiritual home in the Anglican Church.

I think there is an intuitive understanding that the Anglican Church—especially in the global south—is of a more charismatic flavor within the communion. I know that I am stating the obvious when I say that there is not much singing, dancing or drumming in our churches in Ottawa. An Anglican from Brazil, or from the Philippines, or from Nigeria is more likely to have been in a more outwardly expressive congregation. It’s natural for people like myself to comment on such differences in conversations about the congregations we left and those we are trying to join. But I think this intuition is the unfortunate driving force behind the advice that is given to people like myself to leave and find spiritual homes elsewhere.

In the process of trying to be genuinely helpful, what has been created is an unofficial sorting of cultures. The impression people like myself are is that “the Anglican Church in Ottawa is not really home for you. Your loud and energetic version of Anglican-ness will have a better home at other denominations or congregations than it will with ours.” I am sorry if this comes off as harsh, but it is an experience that is common to many.

I had the privilege of being on one of the Shape of Parish Ministry committees. In our conversations about new worshipping communities, I started to become more vocal about my opinion that we have not been very good at providing a landing spot for new Canadians. I am sure there are exceptions in your congregations, but I am also sure many of them have been sorted out in the same way I was.

During our meetings, we talked about the fact that while our Anglican tradition gives great comfort for those who understand it, there is a great chasm between the culture outside our congregations and the culture inside. For many people checking out Christianity for the first time in a long while, or for the first time ever, this cultural chasm can be daunting. When new or old worshipping communities seek to reach people outside, work must be done to either bridge or explain the

divide. New Canadians may also be affected by this chasm as they try to put down roots in congregations built by denominations that they were familiar with in their home countries.

It also became apparent that there was a disconnect between the membership of parishes in the city and the changes in ethnic and cultural diversity in the communities around them. Could it be due, in part, to many subtle and inadvertent sorting conversations? The Anglican Church in Ottawa is a historically caucasian church with an entrenched tradition. It would not be a stretch to see how one could, without having any malicious intent, simply be a vessel in unconsciously sorting people based on what one might think they would better connect with.

As we seek to shape parish ministry for the future, we have to stop creating off ramps out of our congregations for new Canadians and help them find a spiritual home with us. This may require that we change some things, explain things we’ve taken for granted, make room for rhythm, volume, and movement. This change will have to be more than tokenism. I believe this not just because I am a black man asking the church that I love to love me back and integrate me into the family. I believe this because I believe that it is what Jesus would have done. There is no indication anywhere in Scripture that Jesus would have met a stranger in a strange land, and instead of making room for at his table, would have funnelled them off to another table.

In October 2022, Archdeacon Mark Whittall, myself and a group of other people decided to take a chance and try an experiment. A service at 4 p.m. on Sunday afternoons at Trinity on Bank Street. We set out to see if we could do the thing we’d been talking about.

Now, before you rush over to see this perfect service where all problems have been sorted out, I have to tell you that we are quite far from perfect. Our attendance fluctuates from week to week, and there is much work still to be done. But whether our experiment works out or fails and teaches us lessons for the future, we have to try.

My prayer for our diocese is that more and more people will try little experiments where they are at. My prayer is that the “helpful” sorting out of people would cease and that we would be congregations that throw our arms open wide and welcome all spiritually seeking people.