

No Room in the Inn: When the Church Invites Our Voices, But Not Our Power

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This reflection is offered to support ongoing conversations around structural racial justice within the Church of England, particularly during the Christmas season.

Introduction

Every Christmas, the Church retells the story of Mary and Joseph being turned away from shelter: “There was no room in the inn” (Luke 2:7). It is a story often spiritualised, but its social and political context cannot be ignored. It begins with imperial census, displacement, and structural exclusion. That familiar phrase — “no room” — still resonates with many.

For individuals from UK Minoritised Ethnic / Global Majority Heritage (UKME/GMH) backgrounds in the Church of England, the experience of being invited into visibility but not into power is common. The Church often welcomes stories, cultural contributions, and perspectives from UKME/GMH people — especially during key seasons such as Black History Month or Racial Justice Sunday — but too rarely integrates that insight into decision-making structures or long-term governance.

This recurring pattern reflects a wider institutional phenomenon known as **epistemic extraction followed by recontainment**. It deserves closer attention if the Church is to move beyond performative inclusion toward genuine structural justice.

What Is Epistemic Extraction Followed by Recontainment?

The term refers to a process in which knowledge from racialised individuals or communities is actively invited, celebrated, or utilised — but then removed from its original context, stripped of agency, and reabsorbed into dominant systems without meaningful change.

In church settings, this often plays out in ways that are subtle and informal:

- A UKME/GMH clergy member offers insight into institutional racism; the point is noted, but no action is taken.
- A person of colour contributes liturgical or theological ideas that are then rearticulated by others — often without acknowledgment.
- Racialised contributors are invited to panels or task groups but are excluded from final decision-making processes.

- Statements are published; commitments are made; but accountability remains undefined.

This cycle — invitation, extraction, containment — preserves institutional continuity while giving the appearance of transformation. It protects comfort rather than pursuing justice.

Why This Pattern Is Harmful

The consequences of epistemic extraction and recontainment are not simply procedural — they are relational and spiritual. Repeated experiences of being heard but not heeded, of being visible but not empowered, produce cumulative harm.

For UKME/GMH individuals in ministry and lay leadership:

- It undermines trust in ecclesial processes.
- It reinforces a message that one's presence is desired, but not one's authority.
- It leads to burnout, disillusionment, and often silent withdrawal.

For the Church as a whole:

- It weakens institutional credibility around racial justice.
- It fosters a culture where power remains centralised and unquestioned.
- It risks turning inclusion into performance, rather than a pathway to equity.

In the long term, this not only fails UKME/GMH communities — it fails the Gospel itself.

The Christmas Story as Structural Challenge

The image of being turned away from the inn is not just a seasonal metaphor. It captures the structural realities many experience within ecclesial life today. Mary and Joseph were not turned away due to lack of physical space, but because the system had already decided who counted and who didn't. Their exclusion was social, not spatial.

Likewise, when UKME/GMH people are told there is “no room” in leadership pipelines, theological formation spaces, or budgeted strategy roles, the issue is rarely about actual capacity. It is about institutional readiness to share power.

If the Church is willing to engage with the nativity as more than a sentimental story, it may find that its own patterns of exclusion are not new — and that the Gospel calls for a different response.

Starting Points for Structural Change

To move beyond seasonal inclusion and toward lasting justice, Church structures must move from extraction to equity. This requires more than listening; it requires systemic shifts. The following points are offered as starting points for that journey:

- 1. Establish shared governance mechanisms:** Ensure that UKME/GMH leaders are not just consulted, but hold co-decision-making power in areas related to racial justice, theological development, and ministry strategy.
- 2. Audit and monitor institutional participation:** Map who contributes to initiatives and who controls outcomes. This includes event planning, publications, clergy appointments, and funding decisions.
- 3. Adopt a public accountability model:** Regularly report on racial justice commitments, including progress, setbacks, and changes made.
- 4. Shift from symbolic to structural inclusion:** Appoint UKME/GMH leaders to roles with authority — not just visibility — including diocesan boards, bishop's councils, and strategic advisory groups.
- 5. Invest in theological frameworks rooted in global majority traditions:** Move beyond inclusion of stories and into integration of worldview. This includes curriculum reform, homiletic platforms, and church-wide study.

Conclusion

Creating “room in the inn” is not a seasonal gesture. It is an institutional responsibility.

Racial justice within the Church cannot depend on individual goodwill or short-term initiatives. It must be embedded in how the Church listens, learns, and leads. Until UKME/GMH people are not just invited to speak but empowered to shape, decide, and direct — the work remains incomplete.

This Christmas, let the Church revisit the nativity with clear eyes. Let it recognise that Christ was born not at the centre of power, but at its margins. And let that truth guide the Church not only in word, but in structure.

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