



SST Theology and Race Initiative: 2018-19 update

As you may recall, last year I presented the Theology and Race subgroup's report to the AGM, and explained the steps we were taking as an Executive Committee to act on its recommendations. Our intention is to update the Society on the progress we're making, each year. You can find the Report and last year's update on the Society's webpages, under *Initiatives*.

Our aim is to address the marginalisation of BAME theologians in UK academia within the scope of the life of the Society. We want SST to be somewhere which is receptive of the presence, questions, insights, perspectives, theological approaches and contributions of people who identify as BAME, as well as share the existing benefits of the Society. The hope is not so much simply to include others, as to invite them to shape the Society along with the rest of us. And we want to continue to address similar challenges with respect to gender, and to class.

So what progress have we made since April 2018?

First, we recruited an Advisory Group, which picks up on the report's first recommendation. The Group comprises Dr Adesola Akala (St John's Durham), Prof. Anthony Reddie (Council for World Mission, University of South Africa), and Rev. Israel Olofinjana (Woolwich Central Baptist Church, Centre for Missionaries from the Majority World). They gave generously of their time to meet with the Committee in July 2018. Our conversation helped shape what we've done since then, and we hope to meet with them again this year.

Second, the report also talks about the importance of structural change to address these issues. This year we've brought forward some amendments to the way the Society describes its aims and purpose in the new Constitution. The goal here has

been to restate what the Society is about in a way that's true to its founding purpose, but much more explicit about the broad scope of who the Society is for.

Third, the report recommends adopting a strategy for changing the culture of the Society. That strategy is slowly taking shape in relation to the short paper and seminar streams, plenary papers, Wednesday afternoons and professional conduct. This year we've kept the Theology and Pop culture stream, and, following feedback from those who took part in the plenary panel on Robert Beckford's book we've introduced a black theology stream for the first time, chaired by Dulcie McKenzie. Marika Rose is convening a workshop tomorrow on diversifying the curriculum. Seminar convenors will know that we've encouraged you to nominate co-chairs so that we've a greater diversity among you. We've also asked our plenary speakers to model engagement with the diversity of scholars in their papers. We've asked publishers to bring a diverse range of publications to display. And we've discussed the new Professional Conduct policy. Several of these initiatives have arisen from feedback and suggestions we've had from members of the Society, and we're very grateful for them and would welcome more.

Fourth, in terms of promoting reflexivity on race, gender and class, there's this evening's panel which Karen Kilby has put together ['The Limits of the Discipline: What Counts as Systematic Theology?']. We plan to continue to use panel discussions to help us think reflexively about the discipline and to attend to work by black and minority ethnic colleagues.

Fifth, the report talked about reaching out. One of the most important things we're trying to do is, on the one hand, learn about what's on the agenda, theologically, for black and minority ethnic Christians in the UK and the conversations that are happening in other fora, and, on the other hand, to spread awareness of the Society. Members of the Executive Committee have been attending a range of events, including a panel on James Cone at Birkbeck, the annual conference of Conversations in World Christianity, this year's Sam Sharpe Lecture, and the launch of the Centre for Black Theology at the Queen's Foundation, Birmingham, of which our own Dulcie McKenzie is the Director. We're continuing to have conversations with BAME colleagues, as we did in researching the report.

Finally, we've been seeking to address the report's recommendation to facilitate wider participation in the Society. We've partnered with the British and Irish Association for Practical Theology to develop a BAME bursary scheme and seek some external funding, which we hope to launch ready for next year's conference. We also hope to sign up other institutions, like universities and dioceses, to provide match-funding for their students or clergy, and have had some initial success here, too. We've also introduced a day rate this year, and we've come to Warwick as a venue within easy reach of Birmingham and the West Midlands as an area with a high concentration of BAME Christians.

Looking ahead, we'll reflect on this year's conference and next steps. Many of these initiatives are things we will want to carry forward and build upon. There are two things in particular I want to mention now. Both would involve small changes to the new constitution, which we would need to bring forward for next year's AGM, in order to give members adequate notice.

The first of these relates to our current requirement for people wanting to join the SST to be sponsored by two members. As one BAME colleague pointed out to me, the effect of the requirement – which I'm sure isn't intended – is to place a practical hurdle to joining, especially for people from minority groups who are not likely to know existing members and may be put off by that difficulty. There are ways in which we mitigate the problem practically, and in practice everyone who wants to join is admitted at the AGM. But it would, we think, be better to avoid it altogether. So we would like to propose dropping the requirement. We would still notify the AGM of new members each year, as is our custom.

The second relates to structural change. We have been co-opting Dulcie McKenzie and Carlton Turner as two BAME colleagues on the Executive Committee, to our great benefit and that of the Society. Their membership of the EC means we have people who are BAME making decisions and taking actions in the running of the Society and in taking its work forward. But in order that we really embed that change into the structures of the Society, we think it would be good to formalise it and have two BAME reps as part of the committee structure.

Ben Fulford, Assistant Secretary (Theology and Race), April 2019

