



### CHARLES KIMBANGI

Welcome to the start of our series Invited, today we are going to look at the diversity issues that some of the early church members faced and how we can deal with these issues of diversity. We are joined today by Steve Tibbert, the senior pastor of Kings, he has been the pastor for over 20 years and also plays a key role in the family of churches called New Frontiers. Steve has also written a book called 'Good to Grow' which talks about the remarkable growth that Kings has seen over the years and Steve talks some of the lessons he and the church have learnt during that time. Steve, great to have you with me today, we were talking earlier about diversity and you mentioned a story from your early childhood about a guy called Winston, can you tell us about some of the early stories or early encounters you had regarding diversity as a young boy.

### STEVE TIBBERT

Charles, great to be with you and very excited about this series, it potentially could be groundbreaking for us and so its going to be, at times, challenging, but I think its very important we address this very relevant subject. I grew up in Bedford, which is quite a diverse town, predominantly white but my first experience of the issue of race and racism was we had a good friend called Winston who was second generation Caribbean I used to go round his house and was always offered hot food, a different cultural experience for me as a young guy. He would regularly be round my house, he was the same age as my younger brother who is 18 months younger than me. We were close friends, we had a holiday in the States in our early 20s so he was a close friend but the first time he experienced racism in the church youth group, at a youth camp. I think my dad was actually leading the youth camp. I was just attending and something happened, I don't know what, but I remember seeing my dad walk around a field with Winston and then Winston coming to be with us, at that time I was 11 or 12 it was all very new but it was quite a sobering moment. It was my first experience of some of the challenges and some of the life experiences that different peoples and people groups experience even in church, it was kids, can't put too much blame on them. It revealed something. That was my first experience, I saw him grow up and in the end as I reflected on it, and I still have a little contact with him now, distant, is questions of identity, whether I fit, what culture am I part of, these are big questions for people and I saw this as a young teenager.

### CHARLES KIMBANGI

Diversity is a very sensitive issue and affects lots of people. That was your experience as a young teenage boy, you then moved from Bedford to London to lead a church of about 150 – 200 people, what was the church like in London when you arrived?

### STEVE TIBBERT

It was very different for us we came from a provincial town of 100,000 people, urban scale. The church was diverse. What I mean by that is, someone said to me early on, 'oh you lead a white majority church', this was a brilliant singer, a black woman who used to sing in the Lion King who attended church for a time and she said she'd never attended a white majority church, which was just an interesting phrase for me so I said 'what do you mean by that' so we talked that round for a while and the church we came to was I guess, diverse and difference my experience in Bedford was that it wasn't just first generation but second generation, so Owen would have been in the church and we are using his book 'Crossing the Divide' helping us through the series – would have been in the church and I remember very early on a gathering of a discipleship group and I remember Owen and Colin Thomas, Colin is still in the church here, came around my house and we talked about a whole range of issues but one of the things I was trying to learn quite quickly was how do you really build and lead a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural diverse community both in age and culture. That's where we started and I would think for the first five years we grew a little, in those days we would talk about growing 10 - 20 a year, from about 200 – 300 in the first five years. Then when we opened the refurbished building on the Catford site in 2000 then we really started to reach the community and had people coming from many different backgrounds, so if you come to Kings now, I think the latest survey said 70% of the church are non white so we are actually in a black majority church, I love it, it's beautiful.

### CHARLES KIMBANGI

Over that time you must have had some fascinating stories or times around the table chatting with people, any particular experiences that stick in your mind?

### STEVE TIBBERT

There are loads Charles, I think I am always learning about this I've become increasingly aware of some of the legacy issues. I think when I first came I



was naive, even though I'd had some experience growing up in Bedford, I was naive about some of the issues the black community faced, particularly the ongoing racism, some of the pain associated with legacy related to slavery or colonialism, I wouldn't know, I would have been unaware of that when I first arrived. The differing cultural norms of how life is done, the honour and shame culture, it took me a long while to get used to being called Pastor. I'm living in reaction to some religious 'here's the vicar, here's the minister' so I'm trying to downplay it to just 'call me Steve' and people are calling me Pastor and it's clashing into my culture. I show honour in my culture by inviting someone to my house. I learnt that if I went to a house that showed great honour and that's why when Jesus says 'I'm going to Zacheus house' that's just outrageous because to be a guest of a tax collector who's an enemy of the people. So you get a real good lens into the New Testament. I remember we were invited round the house of a lovely Sri Lankan family, brilliant, they had asked Deb and me to come round for a long time and I was 'I can't, sorry, I'm busy', you know Kings has a lot of people. It was lovely to be invited, but I can't go round every house, but I said 'OK, we'll go' so we turned up and you've got to understand, for a white guy it's not normal so clearly we were the honoured guests, the pastor had come. As I'm talking I'm thinking of another occasion, if I have time I'll come back to that one, we got in there was a bottle of champagne, there was a spread, that was more food than we needed. It was a very hot day so I said 'well, why don't we go and sit outside, it's such a hot day' so we went and sat outside and I'm wondering when are we going to be invited back in to eat and it took me about 10 minutes to work out that if I didn't say 'let's go and eat' we would stay in the garden for a long, long time. And that is so culturally different so in the end, I had Addis with me, and I said 'Addis (Addis and Selwyn are in the church here) I think we should go and eat soon' and she said 'yes, I think we should' so I thought, come on Steve, so I kept missing things. It was a lovely meal, a great day.

## CHARLES KIMBANGI

You mentioned cultural differences, which ties in with my story. My mum was a typical English woman from York and my dad was from the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the 80s my mum left York to go to the Congo as a missionary to share the gospel with people who were very different from her. They ended up meeting, getting married, and through loads of conflicts in the Congo they decided to move and settle in England. So, growing up, I was brought up in

England but I had this mix of cultures, African and English. I remember mealtimes where we would have Congolese food (?) along with lasagne, so it was very, very different. Having Congolese people around the table as well as very typically English people. So growing up I felt the need to want to integrate into the British culture and be like my peers at school as well as accepting that the African side of me was very much a part of me and I found that very difficult growing up. Trying not to reject my dad and his culture but also wanting to integrate into the English culture. I found that clash very challenging and difficult and so I can see why, in churches particularly, it must be very challenging. But of course you mentioned earlier about the New Testament and the importance through the NT of the gospel going out to all nations and all different kinds of people, if we just briefly talk about Acts chapter 8, that significant chapter in Acts where the church is being persecuted, the disciples are being spread throughout Judea and Samaria and Philip goes to meet with an Ethiopian eunuch can you just talk to us about how remarkable it is that Philip goes to share the gospel with someone who is very different from him .

## STEVE TIBBERT

Yes, I'm completely fascinated by your own story, I'd like to hear more about that at some point, but the Christian faith started as a Jewish sect and when Peter stands up and preaches at Pentecost, the gospel is preached, the Holy Spirit comes and 3,000 Jews are added but the promise of the Spirit is ultimately to the ends of the earth. What you start seeing in Acts 8, 9 and 10 with Cornelius and as you start to see the gospel start spreading from Jews to God-fearers and Gentiles so you see in salvation history this is a breakout point. It's fascinating that it goes to Samaria and there's lots of division between the Jews and Samaria because of intermarriage and particularly the views the Jews have of how you can become unclean by association – that's behind the whole story Jesus tells about the Good Samaritan, it's all dynamics and so this is a key tipping point. Ultimately it comes to the gentiles, it come to us but that's a great moment in salvation history.

## CHARLES KIMBANGI

You thought about these issues for a long time but why do you think it's important for churches to tackle the issue of diversity?



## STEVE TIBBERT

I think it's a good thing to do generally because we live in a very diverse community so we've got to learn to connect with people who view the world differently and have different values so I think it's good anyway. But from a New Testament, Christian, perspective, what happened in Acts is the first chapters are talking about the gospel breakthrough and then the New Testament church starts to deal with issues relating to race and ethnic background. To grapple around some of these issues, so we have the situation where Paul rebukes Peter because he wouldn't eat at the table of a non-Jew. What we want to do in this series is we want to make an intentional effort to reach beyond our normal comfort zone. Someone said to me once that Kings is very diverse on a Sunday but as we walk out the door we go back to our people groups. I don't know if that's totally true, but I think there's some truth in it. I think there's something very powerful about listening to everyone's story. The white community has a story, it's sometimes doesn't understand. Put it this way, the white people want to celebrate diversity, the black community want to remind the white community of some of the ongoing challenges. There are lots of different narratives. I always say when we do a Membership Morning at Kings that if you want to be in Kings you are going to be uncomfortable some of the time. It's a lot easier to go to a church of Nigerians or a church of white British, if you really want to make it comfortable go to a church that is white and all the same age. If you come to Kings you will be uncomfortable some of the time. Everything we do is cross-cultural and I just want to encourage people to ... let us all go on a journey of learning, let's gather round tables, let's get involved in the groups let's get here on Sundays, let's engage with the teaching and the scriptures. And let's share lives together. Let's hear the story, because when you hear the story it is remarkably powerful. You kind of emotionally engage with someone's journey in a differing way and it breaks barriers down. I think on the whole Kings has handled this issue really maturely. I've always appealed that let's understand difference but we must also work for unity. And so we don't go on this journey together looking to score points but we are looking to step into each other's world and understand some of the tensions while celebrating that ultimately it's in Christ we find common ground and so we want to value different backgrounds, styles, but ultimately we want to find common ground in Jesus.

## CHARLES KIMBANGI

Amen. Do you mind just praying for us as we close this session?

## STEVE TIBBERT

Sure. Lord we just thank You for Your heart for people and Your desire to reach the nations. Thank you for Kings thank you for the diversity of this local church. We ask as we lift the lid on this in the coming weeks that we would sense your presence with us. That it would be a time of healing and celebration, that it would be a time of learning and understanding. We pray as we read the daily Bible notes, as we engage in groups, as we invite people around our houses for meals, as we gather on Sundays. We would really sense Your presence with us and that we would display on earth something that will definitely be in heaven. That you will gather all tribes and tongues through the generations, what a day, so we just ask for Your hand with us to Your glory. In Jesus Name. Amen.

## CHARLES KIMBANGI

Amen. Diversity is a sensitive issue but one that we need to talk about, so why don't you discuss these things in your groups, be honest and open and see you again next week.