

Institutional Bias and the Challenge of Inclusivity in Evangelical Church Leadership: *A Case Study of the FIEC*

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Abstract

Despite the increasing ethnic diversity of congregations in many evangelical churches in the UK, leadership structures within these institutions often remain predominantly white. This paper explores the tension between institutional continuity and the vibrancy brought by ethnically diverse congregations within the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC). It critically examines whether the leadership structures within these churches reflect systemic bias, cultural inertia, or an unwillingness to adapt to demographic changes. Drawing from sociological theories on institutional power and church governance, this study investigates the theological and historical justifications used to maintain homogeneity in leadership and proposes a framework for meaningful inclusivity.

Introduction

The rapid growth of ethnically diverse congregations within the evangelical church in the UK has led to increased scrutiny of leadership structures that remain overwhelmingly white. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the FIEC, a network of independent evangelical churches that emphasise doctrinal purity and theological conservatism. While many of these churches celebrate the multicultural nature of their congregations, leadership structures remain largely unchanged, raising questions about systemic barriers to inclusivity. This paper explores how institutional inertia, theological commitments, and social dynamics contribute to leadership disparities.

Theoretical Framework: Institutional Bias and Social Reproduction

Institutional bias within church leadership can be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus and cultural capital. Bourdieu argues that social institutions, including religious organisations, reproduce existing power structures by privileging those who possess the dominant cultural capital within the institution.¹ In the case of FIEC churches, the persistence of white leadership despite increasingly diverse congregations suggests a form of social reproduction where leadership norms are passed down within a closed network—the “Old Boys’ Club”—thereby maintaining institutional continuity at the expense of inclusivity.

Neo-institutional theory also provides insights into why organisations resist change. According to Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell's concept of institutional isomorphism,

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78.

organisations tend to conform to established norms to maintain legitimacy.² Within the FIEC, leadership selection processes may be shaped by a desire to align with historically white evangelical traditions, reinforcing structural homogeneity even when demographic shifts suggest a need for change.

Theological Justifications and Institutional Resistance

Churches within the FIEC often appeal to theological conservatism as a justification for maintaining existing leadership structures. The commitment to male eldership, based on complementarian theology, is one example of a doctrinal position that limits leadership opportunities for certain groups.³ However, this theological stance does not inherently exclude ethnic minorities from leadership positions, suggesting that additional social and cultural factors contribute to the racial disparity.

Historical patterns of evangelical church leadership also play a role. Evangelicalism in the UK has been historically shaped by white leadership networks, and these networks continue to influence pastoral appointments.⁴ In some cases, informal mentoring and ordination processes prioritise individuals who share the dominant leadership culture, unintentionally sidelining ethnically diverse candidates who do not have access to these networks.

The Disparity in Leadership Representation: A Case Study of the FIEC

Several FIEC-affiliated churches exhibit a striking contrast between the ethnic composition of their congregations and their leadership teams. Observational data from multiple churches reveal that while congregations often include a significant proportion of Black, Asian, and other ethnic minority members, their leadership structures remain overwhelmingly white.⁵

Interviews with congregants from diverse backgrounds highlight a sense of disconnect between their lived experiences and the cultural dynamics of church leadership. Some report feeling valued as members but overlooked when it comes to leadership development opportunities. Others express frustration with a lack of intentional strategies to integrate diverse perspectives into decision-making processes.⁶

The appointment of an intercultural advisor within the FIEC raises further questions about institutional commitment to inclusivity. While this position signals a recognition of diversity-related concerns, its effectiveness depends on whether it translates into structural changes within individual churches. If the role functions primarily as a symbolic gesture without meaningful authority, it risks reinforcing rather than addressing institutional bias.

² Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell, “*The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organisational Fields*,” *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 2 (1983): 147–160.

³ John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 45.

⁴ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989), 98.

⁵ Observational and survey data collected from FIEC-affiliated churches, 2024/2025.

⁶ Interview with church members from ethnically diverse backgrounds, conducted January/February 2025.

A Model for Inclusive Leadership: Moving Beyond Tokenism

Addressing leadership disparities requires intentional strategies that move beyond token representation. Several key steps can facilitate genuine inclusivity within evangelical church leadership:

1. Reforming Leadership Development Pathways – Churches must create transparent and accessible leadership development programs that actively encourage participation from diverse ethnic backgrounds. This could include mentorship initiatives, theological training scholarships, and targeted leadership pipelines.

2. Challenging Cultural Norms in Leadership Selection – Churches should critically assess whether their leadership selection processes unconsciously favour candidates who fit a traditional mould. Broadening criteria to recognise different leadership styles and cultural expressions of faith can help break the cycle of exclusivity.

3. Structural Accountability Mechanisms – Establishing diversity benchmarks within leadership teams and introducing accountability structures can ensure that inclusivity is more than a rhetorical commitment. Regular reporting on leadership demographics and diversity policies can promote transparency.

4. Theological Re-examination – While remaining faithful to evangelical convictions, churches should engage in theological reflection on issues of race, culture, and justice. Exploring biblical models of diverse leadership, such as the multi-ethnic leadership team in the church of Antioch (Acts 13:1), can provide a theological foundation for change.

Conclusion

The persistence of white-dominated leadership in ethnically diverse FIEC churches reflects deeper structural and cultural biases rather than mere oversight. While theological convictions shape leadership structures, institutional inertia and social reproduction play a significant role in maintaining the status quo. Moving toward genuine inclusivity requires intentional efforts to reform leadership pathways, challenge entrenched norms, and establish accountability structures that reflect the biblical vision of a multi-ethnic body of Christ. Without such changes, the vibrancy of diverse congregations will continue to be overshadowed by an institution resistant to reform.

Questioning isn't division—especially when the emperor's got no clothes!

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