

London: Global reach

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300 LANGUAGES – Many Muslims live in the Marble Arch area of London. But they represent only a fraction of the myriad cultures and religions in the city, where more than 300 languages are spoken. (IMB PHOTO)

On a crisp October day in London's Trafalgar Square, the solemn marble monuments of Great Britain's former empire gaze upon a curious scene:

It's "Simcha on the Square," a celebration of 350 years of Jewish life in London. Thousands gather — and not just English Jews and gentiles eager to enjoy kosher food and traditional music. The crowd includes people of nearly every conceivable appearance: turban-wearing Sikhs, Indians, Chinese, Africans, Rastafarians, hipsters, bikers. They dance or tap their toes to the beat of performances by "the Jewish Elvis" and "K-Groove," a Klezmer-reggae-jazz band.

Multicultural bliss, at least for an afternoon.

Welcome to the new London. Bowler-hat London no longer exists. Nor does the London of Shakespeare, of Charles Dickens or even the 20th-century London of the Beatles. Sure, millions of tourists still

visit the great sites of the old city. They still ride the double-decker red buses and flock to watch the queen and the changing of the guard.

But London is no longer really an English city; it is a world city. Set to host the 2012 Summer Olympics, it now proclaims itself the "capital of the world" — and for good reason.

'A world in one city'

With a population of some 8.5 million people (estimates range as high as 14 million for the greater metro region), London vies with Paris as the largest city in Western Europe. Much of the world's high-powered finance flows through its gleaming office towers and great investment houses.

Population numbers and dollars, however, don't tell the true tale of London's global reach.

As a coverage by The Guardian newspaper confirmed in 2005, London has become “a world in one city” (see stories and maps at www.guardian.co.uk/britain/london/0,,1394802,00.html).

London “is uncharted territory,” wrote Guardian reporter Leo Benedictus. “Never have so many different kinds of people tried living together in the same place before.

“Altogether, more than 300 languages are spoken by the people of London, and the city has at least 50 non-indigenous communities with populations of 10,000 or more. Virtually every race, nation, culture and religion in the world can claim at least a handful of Londoners.”

Never-ending wave of newcomers

Since its earliest beginnings as Londinium, a Roman garrison town built in 43 A.D., this great metropolis has attracted pilgrims, missionaries, immigrants, traders, colonial subjects and invaders. But the human waves that have washed over London in the last generation or two have brought the greatest cultural change since the Normans invaded in 1066.

A few glimpses:

- Emerge from the London Underground train station in Southall and you’ll think you’re in New Delhi. Temples, mosques, South Asian restaurants and markets dominate the area. On some streets there isn’t a white face in sight. Parts of Hackney feel like Ho Chi Minh City; parts of Wembley feel like Mogadishu. Other areas look and sound like Moscow (at least 250,000 Russians live in Britain) or Istanbul (more than 150,000 Turks and Kurds).
- The largest Sikh and Hindu temples outside India are in London. Hundreds of mosques serve as many as 1.3 million Muslim Londoners.
- An estimated 600,000 Poles have flooded London over the last several years, the largest of successive waves of Russians, Albanians, Bulgarians and other Eastern Europeans streaming into the city.



ALL TRIBES AND TONGUES – Chinese New Year in central London starts with a parade to celebrate 2008, the “Year of the Rat.” One missionary likens London to heaven, where members of all tribes and tongues will worship God. (IMB PHOTO)

Some of London’s ethnic communities are insulated, even isolated. Others freely mix and mingle with white Britons and other immigrants. Their children mingle even more, creating new cultural variations.

“When we first arrived in London, you’d see teens from many different nations walking home from school and hanging out — all calling themselves ‘Brits’ — not English, but ‘Brits,’” says missionary “Patrick Sims,” the Southern Baptist International Mission Board’s city strategist and team leader for London. “Now there’s been a move to forming gangs. Drugs and crime are on the rise. We can’t tackle that issue on a large scale, but we can come alongside teenagers and share the hope of Christ.”

Mixing bowl of nations

How did London become a mixing bowl of nations?

Large groups of South Asians and West Indians arrived from England's former colonies after World War II to rebuild the city and provide labor for its new industries. Friendly immigration policies and social services have attracted many more groups from far-flung places. Countless "asylum seekers" have come seeking safety, sanctuary or economic opportunities. More recently, the European Union's open-border policies have encouraged hordes of job-seeking citizens from EU member states.

Changes: Thrill or threat?

Some Anglo Londoners love the exploding cultural diversity and see it as an exciting rebirth. Some are indifferent. Others worry about increases in crime and poverty that have come with massive immigration. They resent the pressure on England's social services — and fear losing jobs to foreigners.

Many Londoners express deep concern about homegrown Islamic terrorism, which showed itself most violently in the 2005 Underground train bombings that killed hundreds of innocents.

Others see London quickly losing whatever is left of its heritage to enforced political correctness and unchecked multiculturalism. They fear London is becoming "Londonistan" — a shiny, Disneyesque collection of tourist attractions surrounded by separate, increasingly radicalized ethnic "no go" zones.

Reaching the city of the future

The siege mentality even seeps into London's churches, where Christians already contend with one of the most secularized societies in Europe. While 58 percent of Londoners claimed to be "Christian" in the 2001 census, here's a more realistic estimate: 80 percent have had no personal encounter with Jesus Christ, and only a small minority follow Him as Lord.

The reality is that London has changed forever. In a globalized world, former mayor Ken Livingstone observed, "This city is the future" — for better or



EID ON THE SQUARE – Some of London's 1.3 million Muslims gather in Trafalgar Square for "Eid on the Square," a celebration of the festival that ends Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting and repentance. (IMB PHOTO)

worse. You can embrace it, deny it, fear it or fight it."

Haunted by voices of London

Patrick Sims, the IMB London strategist, embraces it. London's new reality is why God called him there. Passing through the city on the way home from an overseas trip, he visited a friend who lived there.

"As we walked the streets of London, I bet I heard 65 languages," he recalls. "When I got back home, I was waking up at night hearing those voices and seeing those faces from all over the world. It was as if God said, 'You don't have to go to the world; the world has come to you. The world is in London and that is where I want you to be.'"

Sims and his wife, "Sarah," followed the divine voice back to London. Today they lead a team of missionaries dedicated to reaching the lost people of the city — particularly members of the least-evangelized people groups with populations above 100,000.

"We want to create forms of church that are relevant, reproducible and multiplying for every people segment of London — and beyond," he explains.



“We say ‘and beyond’ because I’m trying to start a rumor that London is the final frontier. The whole world is here, and we can openly share the Gospel. London has five airports, one of which is the largest in the world, sending and bringing people to and from every corner of the globe.”

Topple the strongholds

Their strategy: first and foremost, fervent and ongoing prayer to topple the old and new spiritual strongholds of the city — secularism, exhausted state religious institutions, competing faiths, paganism, Satanism, New Age mysticism.

Next, they’re reaching into communities by making friends and meeting needs through services like teaching English. They’re working with local partners such as Boyd Williams, a visionary Baptist pastor in Southall and Mark Melliush, evangelistic Anglican vicar of St. Paul’s Church in Ealing, west London.

Melliush, in his mid-40s, belies the stereotype of the doddering vicar left behind by changing times. He grew up a typically unchurched modern Brit, but when he gave his life to Jesus as a young man, he wanted to make a difference. Arriving at St. Paul’s 15 years ago, he found a dying parish of 60 people — all over age 60. Today the church attracts more than 1,000 regulars, including hundreds of children, by proclaiming the saving love of Christ.

Teasing apart the tangle

How did they do it in a jumbled-up community of middle-class Anglo workers, jobless poor people, Poles, Hindus and Muslims?

“We meet people of all different backgrounds and faiths,” Melliush says. “Not only do we minister to people in poverty; we’re able to reach them with a language school. We do job fairs. We help put people in jobs. We go into the schools. We even bought the coffee shop down on the high street so we’ve got a ‘front door’ to ensure people have got a way in. And it works.

“(London) is a diverse community. The church has to see that and adapt to it, not be fearful of it. We’ve got to be all things to all people so that we might share Christ. How can we reach them? By being absolutely outrageous with the love of God, we can cross all boundaries. Get out on the street and do stuff.”

That’s the attitude that will reach the new London and — as new disciples of all creeds and colors there are won to Christ — the world. One missionary even likens the city to heaven, where, as the Book of Revelation says, members of all tribes and tongues will one day worship before God’s throne.

“They’re gonna be there,” she says. “So living in London is a chance to practice heaven on earth.”

Names in quotation marks have been changed.

Pray

- for influential leaders in many of London’s unreached communities to become followers of Christ and lead others to Him.
- for wisdom and discernment for IMB workers and their partners as they seek the most effective ways to reach the lost of London.
- that Southern Baptists truly called by God to serve Him in London will answer His call.
- for protection from spiritual oppression for Christian workers. Many struggle with discouragement and depression because of spiritual opposition from many directions: secularism, paganism, unresponsiveness and hostility from others, hectic schedules, conflict and confusion.

Act

Interested in serving in London or mobilizing your church to partner with the IMB mission team and London Baptists? Contact Brittany Conner at bconner@imb.org.

