

The History of Black Majority Churches in London

by Rev. Israel Oluwole Olofinjana

London as the capital of Britain has played a fascinating role in the history and emergence of Black Majority Churches (BMCs). There is a concentration of BMCs in London and other major cities such as Bristol, Birmingham, Liverpool, Bristol, Manchester and Edinburgh for several reasons. In the case of London, one obvious factor is that as a capital city it is well known in Africa and the Caribbean. Another reason is that London is usually one of the first points of entry into the UK. This is because of the advantage of seaport in the past and airport in the modern era which means that it is easily accessible to immigrants. As a major modern city London also has job opportunities and creates a multicultural environment compared to rural areas. New immigrants also join social and family networks existing in London. The unique role that London plays in the history of BMCs includes the fact that the first BMC in Europe was founded in London. This was Sumner Road Chapel founded by Rev Thomas Kwame Brem-Wilson in Peckham in 1906. Rev Brem-Wilson, a business man and school master was born into a wealthy family in Dixcove, Ghana around 1855. He immigrated to Britain in 1901 and founded Sumner Road Chapel known today as Sureway International Christian Ministries in Herne Hill South East London. Rev Brem-Wilson's Church was an African Pentecostal Church and he was also involved with the origins of the Pentecostal movement in Britain. This was because he was friends with the likes of Alexander Boddy (the Anglican priest that is recognised as the father of British Pentecostalism), Cecil Polhill (one of the pioneers of Pentecostal missionary movement in Britain), D.P. Williams and W.J. Williams (founders of the Apostolic Church in Britain).

The next phase of the history of BMCs in London was the founding of the League of Coloured Peoples' started by Dr Harold Moody. Although this was not a Church but it functioned as a Para-Church agency that catered for the needs of Black people then. Harold Moody was born in Jamaica in 1882 and he came to London in 1908 to pursue a career in medicine. He studied at Kings College Hospital in London and qualified as a medical Doctor. Frustrated at the lack of opportunity to practice

medicine, he turned his attention to the medical needs of Black people in Peckham. To this end, being convinced by his faith, he started the League of Coloured People on 13th of March 1931 at the central YMCA, Tottenham Court Road.

The 1940s and 1950s saw the influx of Caribbean families into the UK due to the invitation of the British government asking them to come and help build the country after the devastations of Second World War. This led to the formation of Caribbean Pentecostal and Holiness Churches. The first of the Caribbean Pentecostal Churches founded in the UK was Calvary Church of God in Christ which started in London in 1948. Others soon followed such as the New Testament Church of God (1953), Church of God of Prophecy (1953), Wesleyan Holiness Church (1958) and New Testament Assembly (1961) to mention a few. The first New Testament Church of God in London was founded in the Hammersmith area in 1959. It was also during the 1950s that the renowned late Guyanese missionary, Phillip Mohabir came as a missionary to Britain. Phillip came in 1956 and started an itinerant ministry in Brixton which included preaching in shops, pubs, on the buses and from house to house. He also planted Churches in London and outside London. He later pioneered the founding of West Indian Evangelical Alliance (WIEA) in 1984. WIEA was later known as The African Caribbean Evangelical Alliance (ACEA) which is now defunct.

The independence of African countries from around 1957 onwards led to African diplomats, students, tourist coming to Britain. When they discovered like the Caribbeans before them that they were rejected by the British Churches and society at large, this led to the founding of African Instituted Churches (AICs) in London. The first of such Churches to be planted was the Church of the Lord (Aladura) planted in 1964 by the late Apostle Adejobi in South London. This Church has its headquarters (HQ hereafter) in Nigeria. Others soon followed such as the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in 1965 (HQ in Nigeria), the Celestial Church of Christ in 1967 (HQ also in Nigeria), Aladura International Church founded by Rev. Father Olu Abiola in 1970. Others include Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) Mount Bethel founded by Apostle Ayo Omideyi in 1974 (HQ in Lagos Nigeria), and Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) of Great Britain in 1976 (HQ in Ibadan Nigeria). The first of the Ghanaian Churches to arrive in England was the Musama Disco Christo Church (MDCC) in London in 1980.

Finally, from around the 1980s and 1990s, there emerged a new type of African Churches, Newer Pentecostal Churches (NPCs). It is the explosive growth of these Churches particularly in the 1990s that has drawn the attention of scholars and currently the media to BMCs. Some of these Churches are Deeper Life Bible Church founded in London in 1985, New Covenant Church, founded in London in 1985/86, The Church of Pentecost founded in London in 1988, The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) founded in London in 1988, Trinity Baptist Church founded in South Norwood in 1988, Christ Faith Tabernacle founded in Deptford, London in 1989, Christian Victory Group founded in London in 1991, Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC) founded in London in 1992 and many others. Newer generation of Caribbean Pentecostal Churches also started in the 1990s such as Ruach Ministries founded in London in 1994, Christian Life City founded in 1996 in London, Micah Christian Ministries founded in New Cross in 1998 and many more. It is now difficult to estimate the number of BMCs in London as there many not registered as Charities or known. In addition, the problem of using the building of established Churches or using the pastor's front room also makes it difficult. This means researching into their history could be problematic. On the other hand some of the BMCs like to be known therefore they are making their history available through their websites and other printed media. In addition oral history in the form of testimonies plays a vital role in telling their stories.

View Rev. Israel Oluwole Olofinjana's blog at: <http://israelolofinjana.wordpress.com>

Why explore and preserve your history and heritage?

Mark Sturge, the author of *Look What the Lord Has Done*, presented a paper to our [Exploring and Preserving History](#) workshop, which sought to encourage the Black Majority Church to participate in such a process.

Please click the link for the workshop notes by Mark Sturge: [Mark Sturge – Exploring Stories](#)

Please click the link for the workshop presentation slides by Mark Sturge: [Mark Sturge – Exploring Stories](#)

Archiving Guidance

Please click the link for an archiving guide for congregations produced by Philip Gale, a Senior Adviser for the National Archives: [Philip Gale – Enfranchising Witness Archiving Guide for Congregations](#)

Training

The New Testament Church of God Leadership Training Centre and the Roswith Gerloff Library: www.ntcg.org.uk/education/ltclibrary.stm

Published Books

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- Adedibu, Babatunde, *Coat of Many Colours*, UK, Wisdom Summit, 2012.
- Chike, Chigor, *African Christianity in Britain*, Milton Keynes, Author House, 2007.
- Hill, Clifford, *Black Churches: West Indian and African Sects in Britain*, London, Community and Race Relations Unit of the British Council of Churches, 1971.
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Reports

The Being Built Together Project, University of Roehampton, Interim Report (June 2012): www.roehampton.ac.uk/BeingBuiltTogether/Research