Birmingham Baptist Churches Exploring their Black History Project

Church 1: Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church

Story: 'Let no one be a stranger'

Authors: Gale Richards with Don Campbell, Tess Campbell, Trish Cummings, and Rose Sterling

The founding of CSMBC

CSMBC's origins date back to 1737, and it has the honour of being the first church established in Birmingham, to serve Baptists. Its first members met in premises (initially a house, 38 High Street, and then in a building on Cannon Street) located in what was then the town centre (today known as the city centre). The church then known as Cannon Street Baptist Church was forced to move from its Cannon Street premises in 1875, when the building was compulsorily purchased to make way for a new thoroughfare. After several years of meeting in hired rooms, and the Town Hall, the church moved to a premises on Graham Street, in the Jewellery Quarter area of the city, before the decision was made to move the church to the Handsworth area of the city, as more and more people moved to live in the outer suburbs. However, the construction of the new church building in Handsworth was delayed by the onset of the First World War. The church initially held services in public buildings in Handsworth (Handsworth Council House that later became the Handsworth Public Library, and the Grove Lane Council School). The church's hall and then

main church building in Handsworth were eventually opened in 1921 and 1930 respectively.[1] The church was also duly renamed Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church.

CSMBC's links to the Anti-Slavery Movement

Whilst Samuel Pearce was minister (1790-1799) he helped David George – a former enslaved person in America – record his slave narrative whilst George was visiting London, from December 1792 to August 1793.[2] In 1792, Cannon Street also established the very first auxiliary society (in any region) to the newly established Baptist Missionary Society[3] (BMS), which was designed to support and raise money for overseas missionary work.[4] The context to this was that Pearce had been present at the founding meeting of BMS, and had a prior close relationship to one of its founders William Carey. These early and strong links Cannon Street had with BMS, laid the foundation for the church's later significant involvement in the abolition of slavery movement.

This is because BMS had missionaries such as William Knibb posted in Jamaica, who had witnessed the horrors of slavery, as well as the strategically organised 1831 rebellion against slavery in Jamaica, led by the enslaved Black Baptist deacon, Sam Sharpe. Knibb returned England

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[1] *Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church 250* church anniversary booklet, pp. 5-6
[2] David George is believed to have led the first Black Baptist Church in North America. See: 'An Account of Life of David George, in Seirra Leone, Africa' 1793 in Joanna Brooks and John Saillant, ed., *"Face Zion Forward": First Writers of the Black Atlantic, 1785–1798* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2002), p.26, and pp. 177-190; and Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Volume V (1801-1820) – available at: https://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/george_david_5E.html
[3] It was initially known as 'The Particular Baptists established the Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Amongst the Heathen' – but quickly became known as the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS).
[4] *Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church 250* church anniversary booklet, p. 8.

in 1832 to support the campaign for the abolition of slavery. These efforts helped to pave the way for the passing of the Emancipation Act in 1833, albeit the Act contained a provision that required freed slaves to serve unpaid (or with nominal pay) terms of apprenticeships to their former owners. Knibb and many others successfully campaigned to end this unjust apprenticeship system.[5]

Thomas Swan as minister of Cannon Street (1828 –1857) – a former BMS missionary himself having served in India – became an active member of the Birmingham Anti-slavery Society, which helped ensure Cannon Street supported the work not only towards the abolition of this unjust system of apprenticeships, but to slavery per se, overseas.[6]

To this end, in '…1842, the Anti-Slavery Society held its Annual General Meeting at Cannon Street Church with Thomas Swan taking part along with BMS missionaries and other key members of the movement, with mission and justice for the oppressed interwoven'.[7]

CSMBC Welcomes the 'Windrush Generation'

Approximately a century later, in the 1950s, Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church began to receive people into membership who were the descendants of the enslaved they had decades ago sought to free. They were part of the thousands who were migrating from Jamaica and other

[5] Brian Stanley (1992) *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society 1792-1992*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, pp. 75-81.
[6] Thomas Swan appears in the 1841 painting by Benjamin Robert Haydon of The Anti-Slavery Society Convention, 1840 (see: https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp04386/thomas-swan).
[7] See: https://birminghamcivicsociety.org.uk/reverend-thomas-swan-1795-1857-baptist-minister-and-social-reformer/

Caribbean islands and British Commonwealth countries invited over to Britain to help rebuild post-Second World War Britain. Some of them chose to make England their long-term or permanent new home and Handsworth, Birmingham was a popular destination. Church members' meetings minutes of 27 June 1956, refer to 'Jamaican brethren' now attending the church, and go on to list four of them, Mr and Mrs Hyman, Mr Brailesford, and Mr Jarrett, as being admitted to associate church membership, on the basis of satisfactory references being received.

No explanation is given as to why they are admitted to associate and not full church membership. However, it may have been that there was uncertainty in either the applicants' or wider church's minds, as to how long the applicants planned to stay in the area/country, or might fit within the life of the church/society. Inferences might be drawn from the fact that 'Jamaican brethren' in attendance at the church are recorded as seeking support for churches back home in Jamaica. This is evident in the church deacons' meeting minutes 12 June 1956. The chair of the meeting, Revd L Clifford Cross, make reference to a discussion of a request some 'Jamaican brethren' have made for a collection to be taken up for Jamaican Baptist church buildings. The meeting agreed that 'two coloured friends' were to stand at the door to receive the collection that would be taken up on 24 June 1956. Furthermore, church members' meeting minutes 25 May 1960, refer to a Mr Brailesford and Mr Jarrett being amongst a number of people who were deleted from the church roll, because they had not attended the church for some time.

CSMBC's First Black Leaders

By the mid to late 1960s, more significant numbers of Black people from the Caribbean were regularly worshipping at the church, and were formally coming into full church membership. For example, the church members roll lists amongst others Mr Herbert Murray in 1966, Mrs Mabel Mullings in 1967, Mrs Esme Mignott, Mrs Loretta Burgher, and Mr Keith Burgher in 1969. By the early 1970s, a number of them went on to become the church's first Black deacons, Mr Burgher in 1971, Mrs Mullings in 1974,[8] Mrs Burgher in 1978, and Mrs Mignott in 1980. The second Black man to become a deacon (after Mr Burgher) was Glenford Gordon, in 1979. He had arrived at the church aged 16, in 1974, and by the age of 21 had been elected a deacon. He went on to be the first Black person in the church to serve in a ministerial role, as an assistant pastor to Revd Stanley Woods from 1982–1985. The church then sent him to Bristol Baptist College for formation as an accredited minister, of the Baptist Union of Great Britain.[9]

When Revd Stanley Woods became minister of the church in 1978, he inherited a congregation that 'had rapidly dwindled in the previous years to 152 members in 1978'.[10] By 1987 (a year before he left for another pastorate) church membership had grown to 300. The journey towards this growth was one marked by significant changes – some hard fought

[8] CSMBC first considered having women deacons in 1958, church members' meeting minutes of 26 February 1958 record a vote on this proposal being rejected with 13 in favour and 28 against. The 11 January 1971 deacons' meeting minutes record the first woman to serve as deacon – Mrs Cox (believed to be a White British woman) – poised to complete the 12 months vacancy on diaconate that Mr Whitmore could not complete.

[9] Church members' meeting minutes 22 Oct 1979, 5 Nov 1979 deacons' meeting minutes; and *Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church Oral History Project (2005 – 2007)* interview with Glenford Gordon.

[10] *Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church 250* church anniversary booklet, p. 15.

for – being made in the worship life of the church. The more detailed accounts of two of the church's earliest Black deacons, Glenford Gordon, and Esmie Mignott, offer important insights as to the roles they and other Black people played, in helping to enable this change. These changes included things like introducing more dynamic-charismatic worship, through the use of choruses and testimonies, sacred dance, and practising dedications for babies, where the parents were unmarried, in the Sunday morning service. This last noted change, brought to an end a practice that had developed in the 1960s, of dedications for the children of unmarried parents not taking place in the main 'sanctuary' area of the church, or in a public worship service, but in the more private vestry area, and often on a Saturday.[11] This would have been particularly important to people from the Caribbean, because unlike many white British people at that time, whether they were married or not, or church members or not, many felt it was their duty to have their children dedicated.[12]

CSMBC continuing to serve Black and other Migrant/Immigrant Communities

The development and launch of the church's Olive Branch Community Centre in 1985, and in 2014, the church additionally securing a 'community assets transfer' to assume responsibility from the local council of running the Laurel Road Community Sports Centre, have served as important vehicles for CSMBC, to this day, to continue to address the

[11] *Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church 250* church anniversary booklet, p. 15; Stanley Woods (2016) *From the Blitz to Blessing: An Autobiography*, p. 17-19; and Deacons' meeting minutes 8 February, 8 March, 5 April 1966.
[12] See: W. W. Bottoms, 'Immigrants need pastoral care' *Baptist Times*, 11 March 1965.

needs of established, and newer Black and other migrant/immigrant communities. Initially, when the Olive Branch Community Centre was launched it offered an advice and counselling service on important matters such as housing, nationality status, and debt, youth work activities, a children's play group, and mental health support. It has also gone on to host a longstanding luncheon club, that serves the wider community.[13] Through the efforts of CSMBC led by two of its church members serving there as professional youth workers, Laurel Road Community Sports Centre, in 2017 was described as having:

> …built up to over 500 users per week. The users' backgrounds include Asian, Caribbean, East European, White British, African and 'Middle Eastern'. A number come in as distinct cultural groups, but several of the heaviest use activities are totally mixed. This means that you are likely to get into the kind of conversations here that you do in the changing room at the Leisure Centre – exchanging information and opinions on issues ranging from physical health to whether there is an after-life.[14]

CSMBC has also continued to host important civil rights figures and gatherings, including a recent thanksgiving service on 1 March 2026 for the life of the late African-American Revd Jessie Jackson. It was a church member, Maxie Hayles, a civil rights activist in Birmingham, England, who had previously facilitated Jackson speaking at the church.[15]

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[13] *Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church 250* church anniversary booklet, p. 14, p. 18; and *Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church 1988–2002* church anniversary booklet, p. 15.
[14] John Omeara 'Multi-Use Centre Shows the Way' *Inside Handsworth*, 9 November 2017 – available at: https://www.insidehandsworth.co.uk/2017/11/multi-use-centre-shows-way/
[15] See: https://beyondracism.org.uk/pioneer/dr-maxie-hayles/; and ITV news broadcast 5 March 2026, 3.11pm, 'Human rights campaigner Maxie Hayles opens up about how the late American activist inspired him and many others' – available at: https://www.itv.com/watch/news/how-civil-rights-leader-jesse-jackson-brought-message-of-hope-to-birmingham/mfml55c

Black Ministerial Leadership

The 2000s also marked the beginning of the first substantive as opposed to assistant Black ministerial leadership that Glenford Gordon had exercised at CSMBC. It was in 2002, that the church called Bryan Scott, one of its existing Black church members, to serve alongside the lead minister (Revd Clifford Fryer, a white British minister who had led the church since 1989), as minister-in-training from January 2003, whilst undergoing his formation at Bristol Baptist College.[16] Whilst Scott was training for ministry, the church called another Black person, Revd Joe Aldred (not an existing church member), to serve as associate minister alongside Fryer, from 2003 to 2005. Revd Bryan Scott following the retirement of Fryer, became lead minister of the church, and remains lead minister to this present day. The church called Revd Patrick Adetuwo (the first Black minister of the church of African as opposed to African-Caribbean heritage) as associate minister, in 2009 – a role he served in until his death in 2016. In 2018, the church called one of its existing Black church members, Leone´ Martin to be its minister-in-training, whilst she studied at Spurgeon's College.[17] She went on to serve as associate minister at the church, until 2025, when she was called to be a regional minister, in the Yorkshire Baptist Association.[18]

[16] *Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church 1988*–2002 church anniversary booklet, p. 20.
[17] Baptists Together (2019), *100-years of women in Baptist ministry*: *Ministers' Stories*, 'Leone Martin' – available at: https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/542053/Leoné_Martin.aspx.
[18] Baptist Times, 2 January 2025 'Leone Martin appointed Yorkshire Baptist Association (YBA) Regional Minister' – available at: https://www.baptisttimes.co.uk/Articles/703750/Leoné_Martin_appointed.aspx.

The church also offered support to Black church members Joanne Gillings (1998-2003),[19] and Dorothy Rose (2010s), [20] to enable them to separately undertake formation for accredited Baptist ministry at Spurgeon's College, and Northern Baptist College, respectively.

CSMBC's influence on inclusivity in the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB)

Peter Cutts as a white British member of CSMBC undertaking formation for Baptist ministry in the 1990s, was involved in helping to facilitate a Sunday evening coming together of young Black Christians, from a range of Baptist churches, in the area. They met to discuss the everyday racism they were experiencing, and the potential role the churches could play in addressing this. This gathering became known as 'Progress Within', and proved to be an important catalyst for the establishing of what became the Baptist Union of Great Britain's Racial Justice Group.[21]

CSMBC in its desire to help the BUGB reflect the diversity of its constituency at its national gatherings, has regularly made its members available to serve – for example, Black members serving on the national Baptist council, and offering its musicians' and dancers' services at national Baptist Assembly gatherings.[22]

[19] *Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church 1988*–2002 church anniversary booklet, p. 20; and Gale Richards (2024) 'Learning from a Pattern in Black Baptist Women's Formation for Ordained Ministry at English Baptist Colleges' *Baptist Quarterly*, 55:4, 216–228, p.217.
[20] Dorothy Rose explored her sense of call to Baptist ministry at CSMBC, before moving to Hamstead Road Baptist Church, to formally train for ministry there. See: Gale Richards (2024) 'Learning from a Pattern in Black Baptist Women's Formation…, p.217.
[21] See: *Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church 250* church anniversary booklet, p.20; and Ian Randall (2005) *The English Baptists of the 20th Century*, Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, p. 478.
[22] *Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church 250* church anniversary booklet, p.20.

Faith at work in CSMBC's Black History

The doorway into the church building has the following words above it 'within the walls of this sanctuary let no one be a stranger', and these same words appear on the CSMBC 250-year anniversary booklet cover. The Bible is full of examples of God's desire for all of humanity to be reconciled and to see each other as children of God, and thus are to view and treat each either like family. For example, Mathew 25:35-40:

> **35** for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, **36** I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' **37** Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? **38** And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? **39** And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' **40** And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.' (NRSV)

The story of Cannon Street has ultimately been shaped by seeking to break down the barriers between people, so that strangers become like family, to one another. This commitment to breaking down barriers is evident when people of different ethnicities were racialised as black and white, and Black people were treated like chattel, during the transatlantic slavery period. Cannon Street sought to help bring that slavery regime to an end. It can also be seen when Black people from the Caribbean were invited to Britain, as British subjects, to help rebuild the country following

World War II. When many of these Black people arrived from the Caribbean, they were rejected and mistreated by some of the White people they encountered, in local churches (including by some members at Cannon Street), and in wider society. Cannon Street over time introduced changes in the life of the church that helped break down these barriers.

The role Cannon Street played in this journey of breaking down barriers was recognised in 2014, when the church was asked to host a BBC Radio 4 broadcast service. This was to mark the bicentenary of the partnership working between British and Jamaican Baptists.[23]

The images of the olive tree and its branches have also had a strong presence in the 'breaking down barriers' dimension of the life of the church. An olive tree image appears on the cover of one of the church's anniversary booklets, and one of the church's community centres is named after its branch. The theological significance of the images of the olive tree and olive branches is evident from their appearance in numerous parts of the Bible, for example:

Psalm 52:8

But I am like a green olive tree
in the house of God.
I trust in the steadfast love of God
for ever and ever. (NRSV)

[23] The service was broadcast on Sunday 16 November 2014 08:10 on BBC Radio 4 and a copy of the transcript for the service is available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04p5m1c

The olive tree in the Bible is portrayed as an important source of food, fuel, and medicine for God's people. It also used to signify reconciliation (olive branch) and flourishing for God's people through God's righteousness even in challenging circumstances. Accordingly, olive oil (oil from the olive tree) was also used for the ritual of anointing people to do God's work. For example, the changes that CSMBC underwent in the worship life of the church from 1978 onwards, were sought because it was foundational to what the congregation (by then predominantly Black and of African-Caribbean heritage) needed, in order to express their inner selves, and to give their all to God in worship. This is what was felt would enable their walk with God to flourish, and in turn enable God to use them for God's purposes, in the wider community (at the time also predominantly Black Caribbean).

Today, the make-up of CSMBC is still predominantly Black Caribbean, however, the make-up of the wider community has changed, as new migrant and immigrant populations have arrived from Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. CSMBC's ongoing journey of reflecting on how its worship life may need to adapt and grow, to reflect changing demographics, is evident in its calling of Patrick Adetuwo (its first Black African leader), and working collaboratively with other churches (including Asian diaspora churches) in the area, in facilitating the annual open-air Good Friday walk of witness.[24]

[24] The annual walk of witness is organised by Handsworth and District Christian Outreach which is a registered charity (no. 1145292), and the lead minister of CSMBC serves as one of the trustees of the charity, which has been in existence for more than 20 years. The event attracts hundreds and is usually covered by regional media. See: https://www.itv.com/news/central/2024-03-29/thousands-line-streets-for-walk-of-witness-easter-procession

September 2026

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