Birmingham Baptist Churches Exploring their Black History Project

Church 2: Highgate Baptist Church
Story: 'Just serving'

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The Founding of Highgate Baptist Church

Highgate Baptist Church traces its beginnings to mission work amongst children in 1854, who were living in back-to-back housing, in one of the poorest parts of the city, 'the Hope Street neighbourhood'. This work led to the establishment of a church known as 'God's Free Church' that operated out of a hall in that Hope St area. Then, in 1900, the nearby Moseley Baptist Church agreed to assume responsibility for this Hope St church, so renovated the dilapidated hall it had been operating out of, and helped to start a number of organisations to serve adults and children in the Hope St area.[1]

By 1953, the Hope St church was once again able to operate as a church in its own right. Consequently, those worshipping at the Hope St premises were able to transfer their membership from Moseley Baptist Church to what by then had become known as Hope St (Daniel Memorial) Baptist

[1] K.M. Jones, *Moseley Baptist Church 1888–1988*, 14–16.

Church. In 1968, when the church moved from its Hope St premises to its current location on Conybere St, it changed its name to Highgate Baptist Church, to reflect the name of the neighbourhood that Hope St and Conybere St fell within.[2]

First Black Church Members and Leaders

In 1889, the Hope St church was focused on serving an essentially poor (white British) community. Yet, the congregation chose a Black man, Peter Thomas Stanford, to be their minister. Stanford was a formerly enslaved person, who had migrated to England from the USA. In taking up this role of minister, Stanford became the first Black man to hold pastoral charge of a church of any denomination in Birmingham, England.[3]

Stanford had come to England in 1883 to make a plea for support for struggling 'ex-slaves' living in Canada.[4] However, he ended up settling in Birmingham and marrying a local white British woman, Beatrice Stickley. However, his time in Birmingham was cut short for reasons Paul Walker writing of Stanford, previously noted:

> In the 1890s Birmingham became a centre of the campaign against the lynchings of African Americans. Stanford was well known as 'Birmingham's Coloured Preacher' so would have been an obvious

[2] Highgate Baptist Church, Order for Service 'Opening Ceremony and Dedication Service of the New Church', 22 June 1968.
[3] The Birmingham Civic Society unveiled a blue plaque in 2011, at the front of the building, to confirm his status as Birmingham's first Black pastor, and to recognise his campaigning for racial justice. See: Barbara McCaskill and Sidonia Serafini (eds.) with Rev Paul Walker, *The Magnificent Reverend Peter Thomas Stanford, Transatlantic Reformer and Race Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020).
[4] Peter Stanford wrote about their plight in *The Negro Race: The Cry of Ex-Slaves now in Canada* (1885).

> choice when anti-lynching campaigners in Birmingham wanted someone to go to the USA and report on the lynchings. Thus, at a public meeting in May 1894, it was resolved that Stanford should visit the States and report on the situation facing the freed African Americans… After his investigation Stanford published his book *The Tragedy of the Negro in America* in which he gave details of how African people arrived in America, the injustice they suffered in slavery and the horror of lynchings.[5]

Stanford ultimately did not return to England to pastor the Hope Street church, and after he left in 1895, the church records do not indicate that any other Black people came into church membership, until 1956. This is not surprising, because whilst Black people were present in Birmingham for centuries, until the 1950s, they would have been small in number. By 1956, however the number of Black people in Britain increased significantly, as the British government actively recruited workers from its' then current and former colonies to help rebuild post-Second World War Britain. This was facilitated by the 1948 British Nationality Act that stipulated that Commonwealth citizens could have British passports and work in Britain. So many people from the Caribbean and other Commonwealth countries came to work in Britain.

Given the arrival of new people in the area, the church actively sought to reach out to them. Church members' meeting minutes of 6 July 1955, under the heading 'B.M.S. [Baptist Missionary Society] Sunday 25 September' refer to two ministers from Jamaica who were due to visit Birmingham in September, and one of them Revd I Parsons was set to

[5] Paul Walker, 'Biography of Peter Stanford' as cited in Gale Richards, *Text and Story: Prophets for Their Time and Ours* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist Studies, [2014] 2023), 39.

lead the church's worship service on what was described as Missionary Sunday, 25 September. The minutes record that the church planned to print and distribute two sets of leaflets in preparation for this special Sunday. The first set of leaflets were to promote the service to Jamaicans living in the area, and the second set of leaflets were to advertise the church's usual activities. This was on the premise, as the minutes record, that 'everyone living in the district, coloured and white, would receive a leaflet that would be of interest to them'.

The 7 Feb 1956 and 5 September 1956 church members' meeting minutes show ongoing efforts to engage with and support migrant communities from the 'West Indies' (the term commonly used for people from the Caribbean back then). These minutes record the church's efforts to support a hostel – that became known as New Haven – to offer much needed housing to 'West Indians' that was due to be opened in the 'Cannon Hill' area of the city (which was actually the Balsall Heath area of the city). The church's support for this initiative was noted as providing kitchen equipment, and to host a jumble sale to help cover costs.

The 24 April 1956 church members' meeting minutes indicate that the church did have some success in engaging with 'West Indians' living in the area. A reference is made to a Mr and Mrs K Kong who are described as 'two Jamaican friends' requesting a transfer of their church membership from their Jamaican church to Highgate Baptist Church.

The church's social engagement with the migrant and immigrant 'West Indian' communities continued into the 1960s. This was supported by the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) and BMS' facilitating Revd M. E. Sawyer coming to England from Jamaica in 1961, to 'help integrate West

Indians into the life of the churches' and 'interpret West Indians to British people and British people to West Indians'.[6] In preparation for his arrival, at a church members' meeting on 22 Feb 1961, it was agreed that the church would make their building available to Sawyer to host meetings. The church hoped this might lead to them starting a club for 'West Indians'.

The church also purchased some of the West Midland Baptist Association's Birmingham District West Indian Committee's leaflets, to give out to 'West Indians', and contributed to the costs of that same committee in 1964 bringing over a Revd C.H.L. Gayle, to further the work of integrating 'West Indians' in Birmingham.[7]

In the 1970s the church continued to welcome Black church members. Two notable ones are Hazel Nunes and Jeff Nunes, who went on to be amongst the first known Black deacons of the church. The Nunes' were thankful to receive a warm welcome from a number of the members on arrival at Highgate Baptist Church, as they had personally experienced or witnessed racist incidents in other churches and in the wider society.[8]

Highgate Community Project and Highgate Advice Centre

In the 1980s, the church continued to serve those in need in the Highgate area including the descendants of the first generation of 'West Indians' as

[6] Revd M. E. Sawyers 'Report to Joint B.U/B.M.S. Committee on West Indian Immigrants' 20 October 1961,1.
[7]Church members' meeting minutes 3 July 1962, 27 February 1963, and 19 June 1963, and West Midland Baptist Association's Birmingham District Annual Delegates Meeting book 1949-1966, 109, 112, and 117.
[8] 'Birmingham Baptist Churches Exploring their Black History Project' oral history interview with Hazel Nunes, 18 January 2026, conducted by Gale Richards with Daniella Diswemi, and Samuella Diswemi; and 'Celebrating Highgate Project' oral history interview with Hazel Nunes and Jeff Nunes, 22 February 2012, conducted by Andrew Green.

well as migrant and immigrant communities from other parts of the world (e.g. Asia and Africa) who had by then also moved into the area in larger numbers. The church's hosting of the Highgate Community Project, and the Highgate Advice Centre were two key vehicles for the church serving these communities. The Community Project officially began in 1980, and the Advice Centre in 1984.

The Community Project was established by funds from the Inner City Partnership as a result of an application from the Mutual Aid Centre and Princethorpe Tower Tenants Group. When those funds ended in April 1986, the City of Birmingham Housing Department directly financed the project. In 1987, the stated aim of the Community Project was:

> …to help and encourage people to take an active interest in their environment and well-being, and thus overcome many of the problems that arise in this area of the City. The Project attempts to encourage community development and acts as a catalyst in bringing people out of the maisonettes and tower blocks, to come together to talk and support each other.[9]

Revd Paul Walker (minister of Highgate Baptist Church,1983–2019) became the Chairperson of the Project, which oversaw the publication of the community newspaper 'Gateway' and a number of group activities, ranging from a Highgate Housing Action Group that was set up and run by local tenants to campaign for housing repairs, a Mothers and Toddlers Group run by local mothers, a Girls' club for 9-14 year olds, a summer

[9] Highgate Community Project, Annual Report, 1986-1987.

play scheme for 3-7 year olds, and an Over 60s club open daily (serving attendees authentic Caribbean food one day a week).

The Advice Centre was funded by the local government and offered independent important and free advice on matters such as housing, welfare and social security benefits, and nationality.

Local government funding for much of the work of the Highgate Community Project and the Highgate Advice Centre eventually came to an end. However, the church's commitment to serving Black and other community members in the Highgate area remained. It simply took on different and more small-scale forms.

Hosting Jamaica Delegations and an African diaspora congregation

In 2012, and 2014, the church hosted delegations from the Jamaica Baptist Union (JBU). An evening gathering on 12 May 2012 evening gathering was hosted by the church and involved four ministers.[10] Notably, Revd Karl Johnson, General Secretary of the JBU, and Revd Merlyn Hyde-Riley, Associate General Secretary, joined with approximately fifty church leaders from Baptist and other church traditions in the West Midlands to explore church responses to the identity issues faced by the African-Caribbean diaspora in the UK.[11]

On 18 October 2014 two ministers from the JBU (Revd Karl Johnson, General Secretary, and Revd Karl Henlin, a former President of the JBU)

[10] Revd Karl Johnson (General Secretary), Revd Merlyn Hyde-Riley (Associate General Secretary), Revd Glenroy Lalor (Incoming President), and Revd Karl Henlin (Former President).
[11] Gale Richards report to Heart of England Baptist Association Trustees 'HEBA Project Development Worker Role: Report August 2010 – May 2015', 9–10.

participated in a young leadership development event at the church which was organised by the BUGB, in partnership with a national charity called Ascension Trust. The event was called ‘Legacy: Learning from the past and embracing the future’ and was attended by 18 to 30-year-olds from Baptist and other church traditions. The event was one of a number of national events marking the bicentenary of British and Jamaican Baptists working in partnership. At the meeting, there were contributions from prominent Black Christian leaders on the themes of politics, theology, integration, and leadership.[12]

Presently, Highgate Baptist Church is a small multi-ethnic congregation with its members coming from white British, Black Caribbean, and Black African backgrounds. It also continues to extend a wider welcome to new migrant and immigrant communities. For example, the church building is made available for worship services and fellowship on Sunday afternoons to the ‘West Midlands Brethren in Christ Church’, a congregation composed of people of African diaspora.

Faith at work in Highgate Baptist Church’s Black History

From the earliest days of the establishment of the church, there has been a strong emphasis on being led by the example of Christ to serve the poor and the vulnerable. In many ways, it seems fitting that for a significant part of the church’s history its building was situated on Hope St, because the support it offered within the community would undoubtedly have given hope to those who at times may have felt hopeless. This support has always extended to welcoming the stranger. Just as in 1889, when what

[12] Gale Richards report to Heart of England Baptist Association Trustees ‘HEBA Project Development Worker Role: Report August 2010 – May 2015’, 9–10.

was at the time a predominantly white – perhaps an all-white – congregation chose a formerly enslaved Black man from the USA, Peter Stanford, to be its minister, so the congregation through the years has continued to reach out to others.

Stanford demonstrated his own desire to serve the poor and vulnerable. In addition to his anti-lynching campaigning, on his return to the USA in 1895, he and his wife opened the 'Union Industrial and Stranger's Home for homeless women and children' in Massachusetts. An institution whose purpose was described just before its incorporation in this way:

> …to provide for Orphan and Neglected children of the rural districts of the South, and to give them normal and industrial training; also to provide a temporary home for coloured girls who come to Boston and vicinity. "Feed the hungry." "Clothe the naked." "The poor ye have always with you."[13]

The last few words in quotations are clearly taken from words attributed to Jesus in Matthew 25:31–46, and 26:11. This Christ-given commitment to serve the poor and welcome the stranger has continued to shape the life of the Highgate church beyond Stanford's time. It is evident in the prayers of the Opening Ceremony and Dedication Service of the new church in 1968, through the inclusion of words such as "We dedicate this house [church]…for the giving and receiving of friendship by those of every race and generation…". It is also evident in the experiences of

[13] Peter Stanford, *The Tragedy of the Negro: Condensed History of the Enslavement, Sufferings, Emancipation, Present Condition and Progress of the Negro Race in the United States of America* (Boston: Charles A. Wasto, Printer, 1897), xvi.

longstanding Black church members like Hazel Nunes and Jeff Nunes, who have called this church ‘home’ for more than fifty years.

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