Birmingham Baptist Churches Exploring their Black History Project

Church 3: New Christ Church

Story: 'Teach Christ's Commands'

Authors: Gale Richards with Edwin Daly

The founding of the church

From the 1850s, the area around Aston Hall in Birmingham was set aside for housing, to establish a new suburb, and part of that land was acquired to establish a new church in that area. The memorial stone for this church was laid on 5 April 1864. Then, when the building of this church (capable of seating 700 people) was complete, Revd Isaac Lord, who had been the minister of Cannon Street Baptist Church from 1858, left Cannon Street, with thirty-three of its members, together with others in the locality, to form what became known as Christ Church, Aston, on 6 March 1866. It had a congregation of more than a hundred from the outset.[1]

Extending the reach of the church

By 1880, records indicate that Christ Church had a congregation of 341 members, and 550 children in its Sunday School.[2] From 1884, Christ Church began to branch out, by additionally engaging in 'mission hall'

[1] Arthur S. Langley (1939) *Birmingham Baptists: Past and Present*, London: The Kingsgate Press, p. 72.
[2] Arthur S. Langley (1939) *Birmingham Baptists: Past and Present*…, p. 73.

ministry in three other locations. Firstly, through Sunday evening services and Sunday School classes at Burlington Street Board Schools, Aston. Secondly, through Sunday School and Bible classes, initially in a room in Victoria St, Handsworth, and then in a moveable iron chapel, located on the same street. Thirdly, in 1886, through the church starting ministry in a shop with an adjoining house on Bevington Road, Aston. Fourthly, in 1937, through the church beginning services in the Co-operative Hall, and Sunday School in a local Council school, in the Perry Beeches area of the city.[3] Ultimately, these efforts paved the way for what are today known as Handsworth Baptist Church Centre, on Victoria Road, Handsworth, and Perry Beeches Baptist Church, on Beeches Road.

Early engagement with Black people

One of the church's earliest known engagements with Black people is a reference to Mr and Mrs Howell going out to the Congo Bolobo Mission in 1889. By 1896, the Howells were serving local people alongside another white British, Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) worker, George Grenfell, who was also stationed in the Congo. Then, in 1927, Christ Church also sent Miss M. Coles out to the Congo to serve local people.[4]

First Black Church Members and Leaders

By the 1950s, Christ Church was welcoming Black people into its congregation who had arrived to help rebuild post-Second World War

[3] Arthur S. Langley (1939) *Birmingham Baptists: Past and Present*…, pp. 75–76.
[4] Arthur S. Langley (1939) *Birmingham Baptists: Past and Present*…, pp. 76–77.

Britain. There is a clear reference to this in the West Midland Baptist Association's 1956 Year Book:

> The problem of immigrant West Indians is dealt with in the Missionary section of this report, but it is good to know that our Churches at Christ Church, Aston, Balsall Heath, and Hope Street are, among others, making these friends welcome and receiving some into church membership.[5]

It is also apparent that Christ Church through its then minister (from 1952–1959), Revd Lloyd Harding was also leading the way in trying to address the housing shortage for the newly arrived 'West Indians' (the term commonly used for people of the Caribbean back then), as recorded in the BMS Birmingham Auxiliary group's records:

> In response to the acute problem of accommodation for the thousands of West Indians and other overseas members of the Commonwealth, Mrs Arthur Herbert and Rev. Lloyd Harding have been instrumental in forming the Birmingham Friendship Housing Association Ltd., for the purchase and conversion of houses in which these immigrants from our Mission Fields may enjoy a decent home life at a reasonable cost and under Christian auspices. One house has been obtained and negotiations are proceeding for at least one other. The Baptist Missionary Society and the Baptist Union have each contributed £250 towards the project.[6]

[5] West Midland Baptist Association's 1956 Year Book, p. 23.
[6] West Midland Baptist Association's 1956 Year Book, pp. 27–28.

An interview with Revd Lloyd Harding on 17 Oct 1958 (conducted by Helen Roberts from the Birmingham Christian Social Council) when he was still minister of Christ Church, offers further insights into Harding and Christ Church's efforts to support the newly arrived 'West Indians'. Roberts records that Harding has been concerned about the "coloured people in his area for over four years". She continues:

> He is disappointed that the churches of Birmingham have not done more to help them and feels that by this time a great opportunity has been lost. He has 60 West Indian members of his church, 2 of them Sunday School teachers. I asked him whether there were any who stood out as potential leaders and he mentioned 3: –
>
> Mr. Winsor White...A man of substance who was a Deacon in the Ginger Ridge church in Jamaica. A deeply religious man who acts as a "Father" to the local coloured people. His wife is a very fine woman. Mr. White was recommended to Mr. Harding by a member of the Jamaican House of Representatives who was over here on a visit.
>
> Mr. Blissett…a member of Mr. Harding's church who has shown distinct leadership potential…
>
> Mr. Roy Clarke. Formerly a member of the church who has now moved to a new area but could probably be traced.
>
> Mr Harding sees a great need for pastoral work to be done for West Indians by their own Ministers. He had staying with him two years ago a Baptist Minister from Jamaica, who came here for a Baptist

> Convention. He would have been willing to return and work in Birmingham for a period if his fare could have been paid. Mr Harding could have used him as assistant Minister in his church but was not able to raise the money needed to bring him over. This man might still be available and Mr. Harding would strongly recommend making an approach to him if the passage money could be found. Mr. Harding himself is a middle-aged Welshman, very energetic and enthusiastic and seems to have really won the confidence with the coloured people in his neighbourhood and doing a grand job with them. He comes across a good many social problems among them and says it will take a long time before they adjust to what we consider normal moral standards. He was very much interested in the possibility of an opportunity being given for a small group of leading West Indians to come together and discuss with representatives of the Christian Social Council ways in which their fellow-countrymen could be helped.

Harding's reference to "it will take a long time before they adjust to what we consider normal moral standards" is not unpacked, but it does point to an implied superiority of 'British moral standards', to that of 'West Indian standards', amongst some people's thinking at that time.

When Harding moved on from his role as minister at Christ Church, his successor (1961-1966) Revd Malcolm R Watson continued garnering further support for the 'West Indians'. This is evident from minutes covering the 1949-1966 period of the West Midland Baptist Association's Birmingham District Annual Delegates meetings. They include a record of a meeting that took place at Cannon Street Baptist Church on 13 March 1962, where the 'West Indian Problem' was discussed, and it was

concluded that there was a need to establish a committee to address this problem. One of the proposed members of this committee was Revd M R Watson, minister of Christ Church.[7] A 'West Indian Committee' was established and through it, Watson played an important role in in an invitation being extended to Revd Clement Gayle, minister of St Ann's Bay Baptist Church, Jamaica, to come to Britain in 1964, to spend a year working with a number of Baptist churches in Birmingham (including Christ Church), in order to support the ministry amongst the 'West Indians'.

W. W. Bottoms' Baptist Times article on 11 March 1965 'Immigrants need pastoral care' records Clement as having:

> …visited 1,000 homes, interviewed 1,500 people, preached and spoke at many services and meetings, and in the churches where he worked there were 125 weddings and 237 infant dedications.

Bottoms also highlights Clement's observation that "some churches are reluctant to appoint Jamaicans to positions of leadership".

The fruit of this work of Christ Church seeking to support and integrate 'West Indians' can be seen in the more detailed account of Mrs Cassetta Williams, who arrived at Christ Church from Jamaica in 1963, and went on to become the earliest known Black woman deacon of the church (she estimates in the 1970s or 1980s).

[7] West Midland Baptist Association's Birmingham District Annual Delegates meetings 1949–1966, p. 102.

Church building destroyed

The original Christ Church building on Victoria Road, Aston was destroyed by a series of fires in 1989 (and much of the church's records with it). At that time, the church had a congregation of about 120.[8] However, following the fires, a number of the congregation left for other churches, and those that remained hired a room at a local school, to hold their worship services.

Ultimately, Christ Church was unable to raise sufficient funds to restore the original building. However, the church was able to exchange what remained of the building for a piece of land on the opposite side of the road. Through tireless fundraising, by a now small but faithful group of church members, the church was able to construct a new and much smaller building on this acquired land. When this new church building was opened, in 1998, the church assumed a new name, 'New Christ Church'.

Cassetta Williams' name appears alongside two of the other earliest known Black deacons of the church – Mr I Bowers and Mr S Plummer – as members of the building committee who spearheaded the fundraising for constructing the new church building, that was opened in 1998.

[8] Alan Betteridge (2010) *Deep Roots, Living Branches: A History of Baptists in the English Western Midlands*, Leicester: Matador Publishing, p. 430.

Christ Church continuing to serve Black and other migrant and immigrant communities

Aston was originally established as a new suburb in the late 19th century. However, urban redevelopment meant that by the 1980s, Aston was considered to be part of the 'inner city'. At that time 'inner city' areas such as Aston were described in a Birmingham Baptists Inner City Project 1989 report as 'isolated and impoverished', 'in economic and social decline', with the populations in these areas "largely Caribbean and Asian" and experiencing "much unemployment", and "poor quality housing".[9] Correspondingly, many of the Baptist churches within this inner city area found themselves "rather than being engaged in mission to the local community, were concentrated on survival and maintaining Sunday worship".[10] For Christ Church, Aston, these challenges were compounded by the fact that it found itself with an old and large premises, that was difficult and costly to maintain, with a much smaller congregation than the building was designed to accommodate.

Prior to the fires in 1989, in 1984, Christ Church was one of twelve inner city Baptist churches that had begun to meet together as members of what became known as the 'Birmingham Baptist Inner City Project'. The project was designed to help inner city churches overcome the challenges many were facing. It had a management committee with lay and ministerial representatives from the each of the churches on it that met regularly, to plan ways to equip the member churches – (the then current minister of Christ Church and Mrs Cassetta Williams represented Christ Church on

[9] Birmingham Baptists Inner City Project 1989 report, p. 2.
[10] Birmingham Baptists Inner City Project 1989 report, p. 6.

it). The wider congregations of the twelve churches also met together twice a year for ‘worship and celebration’.

Under plans discerned by the Project, Christ Church was poised to secure funding to undertake work to redevelop its premises. This would have provided the church with a fit-for-purpose worship space, community centre, and potentially enabled the church to work with a housing association, to include sheltered housing units on its site. However, before any of this could happen, a series of fires struck, and destroyed its original premises.

The church rebounded from this huge blow, worshipping temporarily in a local school, and after opening its new premises in 1998, not only serving its own congregation, but additionally going on to host a Congolese diasporan Baptist congregation. This Congolese congregation went on to establish itself as a church in its own right, by 2005 becoming known as ‘Everlasting Hope Church’.[11] This represented a full circle moment, as the church had sent out the Howells in 1889, and Miss Cole in 1927, to the Congo, to serve local communities, and now the church was supporting Congolese Christians as they established a Baptist church in Britain.

The story of Christ Church (today known as New Christ Church) continues. In 2010, the church called its first Black minister, Revd Patrick Agyemang from Ghana. Although, some might say that prior to Agyemang’s arrival, when the church was without a minister, Mrs Cassetta Williams served as pastor, in all but name.

[11] Alan Betteridge (2010) *Deep Roots, Living Branches: A History of Baptists in the English Western Midlands*, Leicester: Matador Publishing, p. 428.

Today, Aston is a predominantly Asian and Muslim area, as much of the older generation of 'West Indians' has died off, and their descendants have moved out of the area.[12] New groups of migrant and immigrant communities, primarily from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East have arrived. Correspondingly, the current make-up of congregation is almost exclusively African and African-Caribbean, and the challenges of serving a wider local community that faces many social and economic challenges remain.

Faith at work in Christ Church's Black History

Christ Church's early history was very much shaped by going where there was a perceived need for a church to teach Christ's commands, and focusing on offering practical support to facilitate the living out of these commands. Such an approach has some resonance with the commission Christ is recorded as giving to his disciples, in Matthew 28:19-20 of the Bible:

> "...**19** Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit **20** and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (NRSV)

From the 1950s onwards, as a multi-ethnic church, Christ Church has had to negotiate the different perceptions of what is to be taught as being moral or immoral, or to put it another way – what is it that Christ has commanded be taught in Matthew 28:20? For perceptions as to what is moral or

[12] Census 2021 data for the Aston Ward confirm this. See: https://citypopulation.de/en/uk/westmidlands/wards/birmingham/E05011121__aston/

immoral are often shaped by the different contexts people live in across the world. This is captured in the observations of a visiting Jamaican minister, Revd Gayle. He observed during his year (1964–1965) spent working with churches such as Christ Church, Aston, many British Baptists felt the children of church members only should be dedicated in a church. However, as captured in Bottoms' aforementioned article, there was a contrasting Jamaican position:

> Mr Gayle reports, Jamaicans, whether they are members of churches or not, regard it as their duty to have their babies dedicated.

One of the things that seems to have helped the church to be more open to learning from the perspectives of Jamaicans (or more broadly people from the Caribbean) has been the mustard seed-like faith, that many of them have displayed. That is a faith that means whatever challenges are faced, it is believed they can and will be overcome. Such faith is evident in Cassetta Williams' personal story, and more generally in the story of the predominantly 'West Indian' group that faithfully fundraised, to ensure the church survived, when disaster struck in 1989, and the original church building was destroyed by fire.

As a multi-ethnic church, New Christ Church continues to serve in a wider multi-faith community. It will undoubtedly continue to be challenged to consider and reconsider its answer to the question – what is it that Christ has commanded be taught in Matthew 28:20?

September 2026

Copyright: Creative Commons license BY (Attribution 4.0 International)
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

References

Betteridge, Alan (2010) *Deep Roots, Living Branches: A History of Baptists in the English Western Midlands*, Leicester: Matador Publishing.

'Birmingham Baptist Churches Exploring their Black History Project' oral history interview with Cassetta Williams, 4 July 2025, conducted by Gale Richards and Edwin Daly.

Birmingham Baptist Inner City Project booklet [1989].

Birmingham Baptist Inner City Project Annual Report and Accounts (1986-1987).

Birmingham Christian Social Council interview with Revd Lloyd Harding on 17 Oct 1958, conducted by Helen Roberts, of the Birmingham Christian Social Council.

Bottoms, W. W. 'Immigrants need pastoral care' Baptist Times, 11 March 1965.

Langley, Arthur S. (1939) *Birmingham Baptists: Past and Present*, London: The Kingsgate Press.

New Christ Church Aston (2016) '150-year church anniversary booklet'

West Midland Baptist Association's 1956 Year Book.

West Midland Baptist Association’s Birmingham District Annual Delegates meetings 1949-1966.