Birmingham Baptist Churches Exploring their Black History Project

Church 5: Selly Park Baptist Church
Story: 'It's the Christ in me'

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The founding of Selly Park Baptist Church

The church was formed with twenty-eight members in 1878, although it grew out of a Sunday School, which had been formed two years earlier in 1876. The congregation met in a portable structure at another location, until it moved to its current location on Pershore Road.[1] The newly established church quickly developed a focus on supporting overseas mission, as well as serving the local community. A branch of the women's missionary group (known as the Baptist Zenana Mission (BZM) which had links to Calcutta) was formed at the church in approximately 1881.[2]

The Selly Park area was changing significantly by the mid 1890s and this affected the life of the church. In describing that era, it has been said that:

[1] 'Selly Park Baptist Church 1878–1978 A Century of Witness', 3-4; and Arthur S. Langley, *Birmingham Baptists: Past and Present* (London: The Kingsgate Press, 1939), 157.
[2] 'Selly Park Baptist Church 1878–1938 Diamond Jubilee Souvenir', 15.

> …business men were moving further out of the city to live, young people marrying and moving away from the district, and many of the original members had died.[3]

And by 1911 it is claimed that:

> …the city boundary…suddenly moved out to include Selly Park and King's Norton. Pershore Road was widened, and the church frontage being cut back by ten feet, losing some trees and shrubs, and the trams arrived. They were to remain until 1953…they [the trams] brought rapid growth to the neighbourhood.[4]

An ongoing overseas focus

Selly Park Baptist Church's geographical location aided an ongoing focus on overseas mission. Carey Hall was founded in nearby Selly Oak in 1912, in order to train female missionaries from a number of Christian denominations. In the 1950s, Carey Hall expanded in order to train Baptist Deaconesses. In the 1960s, Carey Hall (that had only trained women) merged with St Andrew's College (that had only trained male missionaries), to form St Andrew's Hall, which was co-educational.[5] St Andrew's Hall closed in 2000 and the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) took over buildings, and it became known as the International Mission Centre, where BMS trained its mission workers.

[3] 'Selly Park Baptist Church 1878-1978 A Century of Witness', 6.
[4] 'Selly Park Baptist Church 1878-1978 A Century of Witness', 7.
[5] See: Records of Carey Hall Missionary Training College for Women – available at: https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/78687f3f-538a-3a02-8da1-2faafb56668c).

In 1936, the church sent its first church member, Margaret Fasham, to serve as a missionary overseas. She served with BMS in the Congo – an area that today is known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) – until 1958.[6] Margaret sent letters back from the mission station to the church when she was home on furlough, she would have given firsthand accounts about her experiences as a missionary. In many ways this early support for Margaret's ministry provided the church with an opportunity to support work among Black people.

First Black Church members and Leaders

Geographically, the church is also near to the University of Birmingham, as well as local colleges in the nearby Selly Oak area. These institutions were known to host international students, and by the 1960s, some students from these institutions were attending the church,[7] but it is not known if any of them were Black students. However, it is clear that the church was being intentional about engaging with Black people in the area, as the church members' meeting minutes on 26 April 1961 indicate:

> Resolved to hold Harvest on Sunday 17th September, followed by a Harvest Supper on 18th. September. Secretary reported that the Reverend M.E.W. Sawyers, the President of the Jamaica Baptist Union, would be in Birmingham on the 18th. September and it was resolved to ask him to be the Guest Speaker, to talk about the Colour Problem. As an alternative the Chairman mentioned a

[6] 'Selly Park Baptist Church 1878-1978 – A Century of Witness',12.
[7] 'Selly Park Baptist Church 1878-1978 – A Century of Witness', 21.

> Jamaican Pastor who has a Jamaican Baptist Church in Handsworth, who might be approached and Dr. Birdsall intimated he knew of another Jamaican in Leeds who might help.
>
> The Chairman pointed out his endeavours to contact the Baptist Nurses at Selly Oak Hospital and a contact had now been made with Jamaican nurses in the Accident Hospital.

The church's newsletter dated August 1961 refers to the baptism of Mr and Mrs G Smith on 16 July 1961. The newsletter goes on to state 'as far as we know they are the first West Indians[8] to be baptised in our Church'. That newsletter also contains a few words from the church's minister, Revd Ronald Mason, who described the baptismal service on 16 July as coinciding with:

> …the visit of Rev. M. E. W. Sawyers, J.P. to Birmingham with a view to integrating our West Indian friends into the life of the Baptist churches of this city, we feel that we have been able to give a clear lead to others. It is my prayer that we shall soon reach many more of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The newsletter went on to once again highlight the significance of Revd Sawyer's visit from Jamaica:

> Rev. M. E. W. Sawyers, Minister of Jonestown Baptist Church, Kingston, Jamaica, and an outstanding pastor, teacher and leader, is visiting England at the request of the Baptist Missionary Society

[8] At the time the term 'West Indian' was commonly used to describe people from the Caribbean.

> and the Baptist Union with the express purpose of helping our churches, situated in districts where there are many West Indian residents, towards a closer understanding between West Indians and ourselves.

The church members' meeting minutes of 30 August 1961 also reveal that the newly baptised Mr and Mrs Gilford Smith were active in the life of the church. They were helping with the forthcoming Harvest celebrations, and they had been asked to work with Mrs Birdsall to organise the decorating of the church. Similarly, the deacons' meeting minutes dated 10 July 1962 indicate the readiness of the Smiths to open up their home for social gathering of the congregation:

> Secretary reported the Social Hour were without a location as yet for the Autumn and asked the Deacons to bear this problem in mind. Dr. J. N. Birdsall suggested Mrs. Clark might well approach Mrs. Gilford Smith whose home might be made available, and Secretary was asked to see Mrs. Clark from the Diaconate.

This inclusion of Black church members in the life of the church also correlates with Kathleen Fraser's reflections (née Fullerton) on life at the church in the early 1960s. Kathleen came to England in 1962, to live with her sister and her sister's husband (the aforementioned Mrs Gwendolyn Smith and Mr Gilford Smith who were baptised at Selly Park Baptist Church on 16 July 1961). She recalled that her sister was living on the same street as Dr. Birdsall with his wife, the aforementioned Mrs Birdsall, who were a white British couple and members of Selly Park Baptist Church. When Kathleen's sister, Gwendolyn, told Dr Birdsall that Kathleen, and Kathleen's niece, were coming to England from Jamaica,

he generously offered to travel to London to collect them from the station and bring them to Birmingham, which he did.

Dr Birdsall was a deacon at the church at the time, and it appears his efforts to welcome Kathleen, were part of a wider church commitment to welcome 'West Indians'. This is evident from the minutes of the deacons' meeting dated 10 July 1962, where he was present and took part in the discussions noted in the minutes as follows:

> The Birmingham Standing Committee for West Indians has published a leaflet which can be used as an invitation to West Indians to a place of worship and it was resolved to recommend to the Church that 100 copies be obtained for use at Selly Park. Members to be encouraged to use them as an invitation to West Indian neighbours or friends they may know.

The church's newsletter of March 1963 confirms that Kathleen was baptised at the church on 17 February 1963. Kathleen when interviewed also recalled subsequently becoming a member of the church that same year. She was also married at the church in 1965, with Mr and Mrs Birdsall's children serving as bridesmaids at the wedding. She recalls a few other Black church members being welcomed to the church not long after her arrival, in 1962, such as Louise Pennicooke, and Mr McFarlane[9] and his family. Kathleen recalls that they were all active in the life of the church, though, none of them went on to be elected as deacons in the remaining decades of the twentieth century.

[9] Deacons' meeting minutes signed 1 March 1965, indicate that Mr J McFarlane would be baptised on 13 December.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, the church abolished the role of ‘deacon’ replacing it with the role of ‘leader’. The minutes of the annual general meeting of 7 December 2003 record that Louise Pennicooke was elected to the leadership team. This is believed to be the first time a Black person had assumed a formal leadership role in the life of the church. This appears to be quite late in the life of the church, however, those present in the church since the 1960s, such as Kathleen, suggest this is because the Black church members had always been relatively small in number, and were content that the deacons already in post were more than capable of serving. For example, Dr Birdsall was a lecturer at the University of Birmingham. Consequently, the Black church members themselves did not desire formal leadership roles in the life of the church. Moreover, the serving deacons and ministers did not recognise the need to be intentional about encouraging the congregation to consider Black church members in leadership roles. However, over the years, as the congregation grew smaller in number and vacancies arose on the diaconate, capable Black leaders like Louise were formally recognised and called to serve as leaders in the church.

Selly Park Baptist Church continues to serve Black and other migrant and immigrant communities

The demographics of the wider community in Selly Park have changed in the last twenty years. It still has a relatively small number of people from Black and other minority ethnic groups compared to other parts of the city. However, it has become home to more young adults who are students, as

well as an increased number of new migrant and immigrant populations from places like Asia, and the Middle East.[10]

One of the ways in which the church has engaged with these new groups is through a weekly 'Selly Tots' group for toddlers and their parents or guardians.

Faith at work in Selly Park Baptist Church's Black History

'Selly Park Baptist Church 1878-1978 – A Century of Witness' highlights the fact that the first sermon preached at the church was based on Isaiah 55:11:

> …so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (NRSV)

It was concluded in the 1978 church anniversary booklet that this biblical text was as relevant to the church then as it was when the church was founded. The church was challenged to continue to focus on accomplishing God's purposes, as set out in biblical texts, and at the heart of this mission, members were to reveal Christ's ways in the life each person lived.[11]

[10] Census 2021 data. See: https://www.citypopulation.de/en/uk/westmidlands/wards/birmingham/E05011128__bournbrook_and_selly_park/

[11] 'Selly Park Baptist Church 1878-1978 – A Century of Witness', 25.

The church's commitment to welcoming Black people in the 1960s, as encapsulated in Kathleen Fraser's story, echoes Christ's command to love your neighbour as yourself (Matthew 22:39). That would have meant seeing 'West Indian' and English people as actual or potential brothers and sisters in Christ. Perhaps it was the church's very early and enduring focus on serving communities overseas, not just in the locality of where the church was situated, that helped the church to grasp that brothers and sisters in Christ can and do originate from all corners of the world.

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