Birmingham Baptist Churches Exploring their Black History Project

Leader's Story: Esmie Mignott 'A Challenger'

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

Esmie Mignott (née Hamilton) was born in 1931, in St Thomas, Jamaica. She came to England in October 1954.

Once in England, Esmie attended a number of non-Baptist churches before settling at Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church (CSMBC) in the 1960s, where she was baptised, and formally came into church membership in 1969. CSMBC at that time was navigating the different cultural expectations and practices of British and 'West Indian' communities. For example, in the area of infant dedications in the church.

Whilst many 'West Indians' whether they were church members or not felt their children should be dedicated in a church many British church members held a different perspective. They believed only the children of church members should be dedicated in a church. The usual church practice was to dedicate children as part of the public Sunday morning worship service. However, a separate practice had developed for children of unmarried parents. They were dedicated not in the main Sunday morning worship service, but in the more private vestry area of the church,

and often on a Saturday.[1] Esmie would later play an important role in the ending of this separate practice.

Esmie made a conscious decision to get more involved in the life of the church, and so church members' meeting minutes 22 October 1979 record that Esmie was nominated to be a deacon, but not elected. The number of votes she received and the number of votes S. G. Hooley received from church members was a dead heat, on the first round. Another round of votes followed, and S. G. Hooley received a majority of the votes, so was duly elected. However, Esmie was nominated again the following year, as recorded in church members' meeting minutes 20 October 1980, and she was duly elected.

Esmie recalled that when she was a deacon, she could not express herself freely. So, she stepped down, not long into the role, so that she could do just that. She was known for speaking up if she felt things were not being done as they should be or could be done better.

In Revd Stanley Woods' autobiography – he was minister of CSMBC 1978–1988 – he referenced the important role Esmie (as well as Winnie Davies) assumed, as a Black nurse of Caribbean heritage, with a family of her own.[2] Drawing on her pastoral skills as a nurse, her own experiences of being a parent, and her personal Christian faith, she met with and helped prepare parents, who wanted to have their children dedicated.

[1] Stanley Woods, *From the Blitz to Blessing: An Autobiography*, (2016), p. 19.
[2] Stanley Woods, *From the Blitz to Blessing: An Autobiography*, (2016), p. 19.

Esmie is long remembered by the congregation for the public words of challenge and encouragement she offered parents, for decades, as she handed them a certificate of dedication, at the front of church, as part of the Sunday morning worship service. This act served as an important part of the church living out the words at the doorway into the church building – 'within the walls of this sanctuary let no one be a stranger'. She helped to ensure that from the youngest (infants) to the oldest, the married, the unmarried parents, understood there was a welcome available to them in that church.

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References

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