Birmingham Baptist Churches Exploring their Black History Project

Leader's Story: Gloria Richards – 'A Trailblazer'

Authors: Gale Richards with, Marcia Smith, Frances Taylor, and Morine Burrell-Banton.

Gloria Richards was born in 1936, in St Catherine, Jamaica, and attended a Baptist church and school there. She arrived in England aged 18, in 1955, already married and a mother to twins.

Gloria found work in a factory, in the Witton area of Birmingham, for a number of years. She tried a number of churches in England, but she was not made to feel welcome. So, she stayed away, and did not go to church for some time. Other Black people in her words 'held church' in their homes, but Gloria did not find that satisfying. She was however still keen that her growing number of children should be brought up in the church, so when a white neighbour, Marjorie Faulkner and her niece Heather, in circa 1967, asked Gloria's daughter Angela, aged about 9 years old, to join the Girls' Brigade, it was a chance to do just that. Gloria's daughter Angela started attending Erdington Baptist Church (today known as Six Ways Erdington Baptist Church).

Gloria still stayed away from church services herself at this point, as she feared she might experience rejection, once again. Despite this, she wanted God in the lives of her children, so sent them to

church activities, Boys' and Girls' Brigades, and she would go along periodically, to support their activities.

When Gloria did start attending worship services at Erdington Baptist Church, in approximately the late 1960s, initially not everyone accepted her, or the other Black people that attended. This sometimes took the form of church members at the door not greeting Black people, and not shaking their hands, reserving such forms of acknowledgment to the white attendees. She recalled a minister who did welcome Black people to his church (Cannon Street) experiencing some white people leave because of this.

It took until December 1977, for Gloria and her daughter Angela to take the step of applying for church membership, and on 1 January 1978, they were received into membership with the right hand of fellowship, according to the Church Secretary's 9 February 1978 report. Gloria and two of her children took on roles within the church not long after that, Gloria on the Everywoman Committee, Angela Richards for the Youth Club, and Andy Richards as officer of the Boys' Brigade. Gloria went on to become a deacon of the church in 1984 (as recorded in the Annual General Church Members Meeting 26 March 1984 Minutes), and she continued to serve on and off in this capacity until the 2010s.

Gloria has taken on many different roles in the life of the church over the years, from helping to lead the Monday prayer meeting, Wednesday Bible study, Saturday jumble sales, flower arranging for Sunday services, a Caribbean church choir, Sisters of Hope Choir, Gospel concerts, overseeing the rental of rooms in the

church to groups, Come and meet each other (CAMEO), doing hospital visits, befriending people in the wider community and giving things to people in need, and occasionally preaching in Sunday services. She is well-known by many shop workers on the High Street near the church, and some people (of all ethnicities) have ended up at the church through meeting her.

Gloria is also recognised within the church as someone whose enduring faith enabled her to play a leading role in her early years at the church, in challenging those who did their best to discourage Black people from attending the church. It was her voice in diaconate meetings and church members' meetings over the years that helped to instigate positive change. She is someone that has encouraged people of all backgrounds to come forward and experience Jesus' love and give praise to God. Because of her determination and others, the church is a much more inclusive place than it was six or seven decades ago.

In recognition of Gloria's long and faithful service and her contributions to the life of church and wider community, in October 2021, the church named one of its halls the 'Gloria Richards Hall'. These were Gloria's words at the time of the naming of the hall:

> Firstly, I would like to thank Gerard [the minister] for suggesting the idea of the Gloria Richards Hall.
>
> Second, I would like to thank the members for agreeing when it was brought to the Church Members' Meeting.

When Gerard told me about this. I did laugh. I never imagined anything like this could happen. Although it is called by my name it's not only me, it is recognition of all Black people who have worshipped and contributed to this church.

Just as we are in Black History Month and we have learnt about people like Sam Sharpe I hope future generations will learn that Black people were a part of this church. Whenever Gerard finishes his course, and someone else takes over and asks, "Who is Gloria Richards?" it may be noted that she was one of the Black women who worshipped and served the church.

Again, thank you Gerard and all the Church members.

A white woman who grew up at Erdington Baptist Church from the late 1970s to the 1990s (preferring to remain unnamed), on hearing the news that the hall had been named after Gloria, said "I cannot think of anyone more worthy to have something named after them".

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