

The Methodist Church

Les and Alison Judd, Mission Partners, Barbados, April 2008

Dear All,

Another update on what is happening to us and another opportunity to thank you for the prayer support you are giving. We have felt that our successful entry into Bajan life is largely due to the prayers of the people at home. That is one level of unseen but definitely felt communication, but we have also been grateful for a different sort of communication. Our last circuit gave us a farewell gift of a laptop computer. How we bless them for it and bless modern technology! We are able to fling emails to the UK knowing that they arrive in seconds and responses come just as quickly. Yet best of all is Skype. It is brilliant. With the camera and microphone on our computer, we can talk to and see our family as if it is live TV. So we do not feel so keenly the 4,200 miles distance that separates us from family and friends.

We are doing well. We have not had any of the devastating cultural shock we feared we might have, though there are little things that are different and which we sometimes find frustrating.



The interior of the Bethel church

As pedestrians, Bajans walk slowly and rhythmically and saunter across the pedestrian crossings, but behind the wheel of a car they are like Europeans in a real hurry. They use their horn for so many different things, like a short toot to say 'I am letting you come into the line of traffic', an even shorter toot to say, 'thank you!' A longer toot to say 'be careful', a full blast to say, 'you are endangering me' and an equally long blast to greet a friend. If you are of a nervous disposition, it is better to stay off the roads.

We find that in some areas of church life too, there are differences and there is much to learn. Adherence to the Constitution is meticulous; every (i) is dotted and every (t) crossed, yet in other areas like church membership records, communication and time-keeping, things appear lax. We have to learn patience and sharpen some diplomatic skills as we try to make our contribution here.

Life within the church is very much as it was in Britain 40 years ago. The 1932 hymn book is still used, many of the churches are full and the choirs are robed. The services seem to be around 1½ to 2 hours long, partly due to the length of time it takes to introduce visitors, recognize people who have anniversaries or birthdays and read the notices.

The Dash Valley services, for which we asked you to pray, were well attended and full of energy. The congregation brought along tambourines and everyone clapped rhythmically, sang with enormous enthusiasm, swayed, danced and waved their arms. The preacher's voice was loud and amplified, so if people did not come to the meeting his voice would reach into their homes. Testimonies were invited and people told their faith stories movingly.



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Easter Saturday morning we went for a walk with friends and had to get up at 4.30 to get out of the house for 5 so that we started the walk before sun rise and the day warmed up. We were up at the same time on Easter Sunday for the 5 o'clock service and watched a sky of mauve and gold unfold through the open windows during the preaching of the sermon. It was resurrection indeed.

Les is coming to the end of teaching his crash course in Christian Doctrine and is having to learn about the origins of Methodism in the Caribbean. The most interesting element is that the early leaders and preachers, both white and black, worked mainly among the slaves and were committed to bringing faith and freedom to them, even before the 1834 emancipation.

Les has also been out visiting with Sister Sylvester, a white haired elderly lady whose face is lined with age and contoured with smiles. She seems to know every back alley and road in Bridgetown whether named or not. As she directs him in the car, he finds himself bewildered by her knowledge and awed by her commitment and caring for the 'sick and shut-ins.' He has visited in little wooden residences that barely stand upright, and rather grand houses built on the hill overlooking the harbour. In each a little service is offered, communion received, and a faith conversation generated. Sometimes the visits feel like burning bush moments when the Lord is present.

The Circuit Newsletter, The Bethel Herald, came out finally the week after Easter, a joint editorial effort by Alison and the Superintendent minister. Alison is now getting an editorial group together to produce future issues. She hopes this will encourage some creativity and ensure the newsletter's continuation after the Superintendent and herself have moved on.

The Women's Commission is gaining interest and we are planning a day event for all Methodist Women on 31st May. The theme will be 'Listening to God; Listening to each other' and the day will include worship, liturgical dance, and a mini retreat in the morning; then afternoon groups addressing bereavement counselling, listening to young people, dialogue in marriage, communication skills and signing for deaf people. A cooked lunch will be served! All this will take place in a large church south of Bridgetown, called Providence. It stands on a site that has been a Methodist church since 1826. It is a salutary thought that Methodism has been active here for so long!

The next challenge for Alison will be attending an Emmaus Walk for women on the weekend of 13th April, something she has longed to do for some years. She is hoping that this will deepen her relationship with God and with other women on the island. And she would value your prayers.

We use the prayer handbook daily for our devotions, so remember and pray for each district in Britain on a regular basis and for the people we know in those districts. Rest assured therefore that we also pray for you.

May God bless you
Les and Alison.