

Partnership Visit to the Jamaica District and the Connexional Office of the MCCA

February-March 2019

Jamaica and Antigua are Caribbean islands considered to be middle income countries. They are heavily dependent on the tourism industry and vulnerable to yearly hurricanes. Some of the challenges that societies on these islands face include high rates of youth unemployment, particularly among men, high rates of teenage pregnancies, a high incidence of HIV/AIDS and the stigmatisation of those living with HIV/AIDS. The Caribbean is highly vulnerable to hurricanes and climate change, both of which are affecting the tourism industry.

The MCCA celebrates its 259 years of Methodism in the Caribbean this year, with a view to a large celebration of 260 years of Methodism in 2020. The MCCA has 8 districts, including the Jamaica District and the Leeward Islands District, which includes the Antigua Circuit. Antigua is also the home of the Connexional Offices of the MCCA. The MCCA is a fascinating church: it cuts through more than 28 countries and more than 6 languages. It has a current membership of under 50,000, and statistically, its membership is in decline. In fact, it shares many of the challenges and hopes of the Methodist Church in Britain, despite having a very different mission context.

THE JAMAICA DISTRICT

I visited the Jamaica District with John and Sharon Harbottle who are currently serving as mission partners in the Haiti District of the MCCA. The purpose of the visit was to explore what a final mission partner placement in the District might look like for them. The District is in its second year of a five-year strategic plan to help 'break down the walls' of the church, and reach out to the community through evangelistic and social action. All being well, it is hoped that John and Sharon would both be a part of helping fulfil this strategy. John would be responsible for helping to coordinate new health clinics in rural areas of Jamaica that are not able to access government healthcare facilities, and coordinate the work being done in existing Methodist clinics across the country. Sharon would be helping develop training material for lay preachers and teaching material for youth and Sunday School.

Health Clinics

We travelled to number of Methodist run health clinics to see some of the health work that the District is already involved in. One of the clinics that stood out for me was the Beth Jacobs Family Planning Clinic in St Ann's on Jamaica's northern coast. This was the first family planning clinic established in Jamaica, in the 1950s. The work carried out there continues to be important to this day, given the high levels of teenage and unplanned pregnancies on the island. Healthcare in Jamaica has now been nationalised, but rural communities, who have to travel far to access their closest public health care facility, are the communities that the Jamaica District wants to offer their health services to. They see this as an opportunity to meet a social need but also to reach out with the gospel of Jesus Christ to those communities that feel isolated and largely forgotten about. We also visited another health clinic in Montego Bay, where one of the challenges that the doctors shared with us is that while there is demand for their services, the volunteer medical staff are ageing and mostly retired, and they have not successfully found young volunteer medical staff to replace them and improve the clinics services.

Sunday Service at Saxthorne Methodist Church

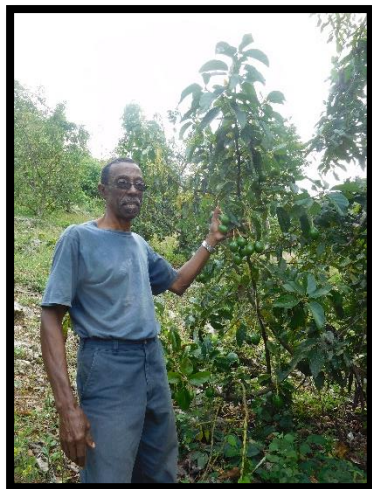
To help Sharon get a better idea of what materials the District is using for its Sunday Schools and see what impact they are having on young people's lives, we visited a local Methodist Church on the Sunday we were in Kingston. The congregation had at least 20 under 18s year olds. There was a group of teenage girls who are looked after by Carberry Court Special School, a Methodist run children's home, who were really keen to share why she loved God and what she thanks God for every day. Here is a [clip](#) of Ashley sharing her testimony.



Sharon Harbottle giving the young people an encouraging message

It was clear from conversations Sharon had with the Sunday School teachers that the current resources are not having the desired impact on the lives of young people. Part of Sharon's work with the District would therefore be to refresh the resources and contribute to one of the District's strategic aims of helping young people grow in their discipleship and ensure they do not end up leaving the church and seeking God elsewhere or nowhere at all.

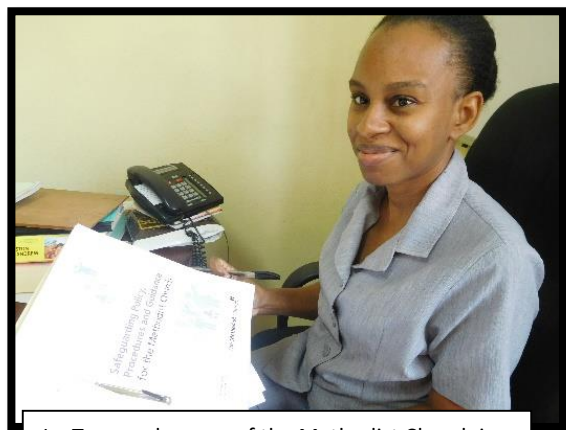
National in Mission Appointments Postholders



Revd Robinson showing us one of the avocado trees

One of the joys for me when I visit partners is to meet with any Nationals in Mission Appointments (NMAs) postholders whose role is being supported by the World Mission Fund. On this occasion, we had the pleasure of visiting two NMAs. We met with Revd Athlone Robinson, the NMA Coordinator for the Egypt property development project, farmer and minister. The project is part of the District's vision for the sustainability of the church for its future generations. Revd Athlone spoke passionately to us about passing on his farming expertise to the next generation of Jamaican Methodists, and cultivating a farm that generates income for the District. He told us that farming goes contrary to the instant gratification that our societies live on. Over time, farming has become less and less attractive to Jamaica young people. However, while it is hard work, it can eventually yield great benefits. His hope is to inspire Methodist young people to learn from him and support his work so that they can take the District into a sustainable future.

The Egypt project includes an avocado farm, which is set to produce considerable yield in 2025. The District has already started exporting some avocados, and being the second largest avocado farm on the island, there are high hopes for this project. In 2010 the District also planted 250 trees that will yield furniture wood to celebrate the MCCA's 250 anniversary. They are also cultivating castor bean plants that the District will sell to the lucrative beauty, industry and food markets. Revd Athlone also visits circuits to explore what suitable agricultural projects could be developed.



La-Toya and a copy of the Methodist Church in Britain's safeguarding policy that she has used as a resource in her work

We also met with La-Toya Cameron Hill, the District's safeguarding officer. The Jamaica District works with many groups of children in a variety of activities, including two children's homes. It therefore felt it was imperative to develop a safeguarding policy that would help curb the country's concerning statistics on child abuse. The policy and training manual is almost complete and La-Toya will be helping the District roll out training for all its children and youth workers. Click on this [clip](#) to hear La-Toya talking about the importance of safeguarding for her and the Jamaica District.

The United Theological College of the West Indies (UTCWI)

The UTCWI is an ecumenical theological college, and was founded by 7 denominations, including the MCCA, the Jamaica Baptist Union, the United Church in Jamaica and The Cayman Islands, the Diocese of Jamaica & The Cayman Islands, the Moravian Church in Jamaica and East West Indies Province and the Lutheran Church in Guyana. Its current Director, Revd Dr Oral Thomas, is a Methodist minister. It is the primary training college for ministerial candidates of the Methodist Church, so it was great to meet some of the Methodist students on the Monday we visited and participate in their 'Methodist denom' meeting (Methodists gathering to do devotionals and worship together-all the other denominations

also meet together in their separate 'denoms'.). We spent time with these Methodist students, learning about the impact that studying at this ecumenical college has had on their personal relationships with God and on their calling. It was evident that many of the students had come to the UTCWI at great personal. Some had left their jobs to study there, some had struggled financially to enrol at the college, some had left families behind. But the common thread that ran throughout their testimonies was that God had been good to them, God had provided for them and that the hardship had helped them realise that God truly was with them and cared for them.



There were 4 Haitian students in the classroom, which is indicative of the high numbers of students sent to study at the UTCWI from the Haiti District. This is often at great personal and financial cost, and with the additional struggle of studying in a language that is not your first language or a main working language in Haiti. It brought home to me yet again that the Caribbean has an incredible cultural, linguistic and historic diversity, and how much the MCCA, spanning 8 districts, many islands and many languages, is a reflection of this richness.

ANTIGUA

On my first day in Antigua, I got the chance to chat to some young people to hear about their life as young Methodists in their context and about some of their challenges. The young people I met were aged between 7 and 18 and my questions to them were simple: Why are you a Christian? Why are you in the Methodist Church? What are the challenges facing young people in Antigua? These three seemingly simple questions opened up a can of worms, but in a positive way. Here was a group of young people who took the opportunity, in the presence of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas' presiding Bishop, Everald Galbraith, to express how they felt: "our church doesn't let us get fully involved in leading activities". "We can't relate to the hymns". "The church is not relating well to young people". "Young people find the church boring". "Grown-ups at church judge us (on appearance and clothing)". I say that this was positive because the young people are obviously passionate about their church. Several of those present are youth leaders, and despite their frustrations, they continue to serve their church and strive to make it better for other young people. They love their church, but the generational divide between the younger and older generations is great. Both the Methodist Church in Britain and the MCCA have a lot of work to do in this area.



The Gilbert Agricultural Rural Development Centre (GARD).

This is Denzil, an employee of the Gilbert Agricultural and Rural Development Centre or GARD. He is 24 and recently graduated in plumbing and carpentry through one of the courses that the GARD centre offers to vulnerable young people



aged between 17 to 35. The Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas was one of the founders of GARD 30 years ago in Antigua and continues to serve on the executive committee. The centre offers free training in the areas of plumbing, carpentry, yacht maintenance, gardening, IT, English and Maths, and life skills including employability, interview techniques and more. It works with local business and the Antigua government to help get young people into employment across Antigua and Barbuda. This work is significant in that youth unemployment, particularly among young men, is high. This means that young men in the region easily get caught up in gangs, drug use and drug trafficking. GARD gives them hope, offering them the opportunity to learn a skill and build their confidence as people who have something valuable to contribute to their society. GARD also takes its spiritual life seriously, offering the hope of Jesus Christ to its students. It holds daily devotions with students and staff and offers counselling as part of a holistic learning experience.

Chris and Vera Lacey, now mission partners for the Colombian Methodist Church, served at

GARD centre a few years ago, and helped the centre secure funding for an extension block from the Japanese government. The new block will be used to offer culinary and food preparation courses for youth who want to work in the hospitality, tourism and catering industry. We also support the centre with a National in Mission Appointments post, the Job Placement Officer, to help place their young graduates into employment (GARD is currently recruiting for a new person to fill this post). To find out more about the GARD Centre, please access their website: www.gardc.org



The two new blocks courteously of the Japanese government

The Gilbert Ecumenical Centre

Nathanial Gilbert, one of the founders of Methodism in the Caribbean, lived in Antigua. Following his conversion in the UK after meeting John Wesley, he returned to his plantation in Antigua and began to preach the gospel to his slaves. The site of his house still stands to this day, with some of the original features, such as the original staircase upon which Nathanial stood to preach. The MCCA has been trying to develop a heritage legacy on this site, with a view to creating an income generating venture for the future of the church. Currently, two Volunteer in Mission teams from the United Methodist Church go to Antigua to work on the site twice a year, taking materials and finances with them to help progress the project. As you can see from the photos, there is still much work to be done. Nevertheless, the MCCA's vision for the centre is to create both an income generating guesthouse and ecumenical centre, while at the same time preserving Methodist heritage and the legacy of the history of Methodism in Antigua and beyond.



The original stairs of Nathanial Gilbert's house, from which he preached to his slaves. Left to right, the MCCA's heritage officer, the MCCA'S Connexional Bishop Everaldo Galbraith and myself.



It seems that Methodism in several parts of the world is facing similar challenges, especially in regard to young people. Certainly for the MCCA, they are awake to the fact that many young people no longer connect with the church, and have sought discipleship elsewhere, often in one of the many mega, lively, charismatic Pentecostal churches that seem to attract people in droves. But there is hope in the fact that young people who have remained in the Jamaica District and the Antigua Circuit continue to love their church and are passionate about taking it into the future. There is work being done to assure the safety of children through safeguarding and to ensure the future of the Jamaica District through income generating farming projects. There is work being done on breaking down the walls of the church and reaching out to communities. There is heritage to lean back on and look forward to in Antigua. There is hope in God's plan for our partners and a great willingness on their part to seek God's purpose as a church in the Caribbean