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‘Race’, black majority churches and the rise of ecumenical multiculturalism in the 1970s

Abstract

At the beginning of the 1970s relations between the historic British churches and the new black-led churches were usually non-existent or marked by prejudices or ambivalences. This article examines the emergence, development and significance of a cross-cultural ecumenical dialogue sponsored by the British Council of Churches. It places this in a context of both growing white liberal interest in the ‘multi-racial’ society and the increasing public assertiveness of collective black Christian consciousness. In doing so it contributes to our understandings of religious change in the twentieth century: both in terms of perceptions of ‘secularisation’ and the complex relationship between Christianity and race relations in the decades after Windrush.

Key words: Christianity; ecumenism; black majority churches; ethnicity; race relations

On the 27 October 1979 St. Paul’s Cathedral resounded to a ‘chorus for dancing’ sung in English and Akan. The occasion was ‘Unity in Love: a Celebration’, a service recognising the diversity of British Christianity by bringing together members of its historic denominations and the ‘black-led’ churches of the African-Caribbean and West African communities. The press release had promised an occasion demonstrating that ‘praise and fellowship, mutual acceptance in Christian love are not only possible, but enjoyable and inspiring experiences.’¹ Music was one vehicle for this. Three hymns were accompanied by organ and the instruments of gospel music - drums, cymbals, guitars, amplifiers – occupied the chancel steps, with performances from no less than six individual choirs, including The Remnants (Seventh-Day Adventist) and the Majestic Singers (New Testament Church of God). The congregation was invited to join in singing a gospel song ‘You’ve Gotta Love Everybody’, and during the interval

¹ London, Church of England Record Centre [CERC], British Council of Churches [BCC], Division of Ecumenical Affairs [DEA], 9/2/5/1, Press release, ‘A historic occasion at St Paul’s Cathedral’.

to introduce themselves to members of other churches sitting nearby. Greetings were brought by dignitaries from a range of mainline denominations, including the Right Revd. Robert Runcie, archbishop-designate of Canterbury; by African-Caribbean representatives of the Calvary Church of God in Christ, First United Church of Jesus Christ Apostolic, the New Testament Church of God and the Afro-Westindian United Council of Churches; and by a representative of the West African 'Aladura' Cherubim and Seraphim Council of Churches. There was some political interest, with Peter Brooke, the Member of Parliament for City of London and Westminster South, giving the reading.²

The purpose of 'Unity in Love' was to publicise the activities of the Joint Working Party of Black-led and White-led Churches, a group established in 1977 under the auspices of the British Council of Churches (BCC) and under the leadership also of black leaders. The group aimed to foster cross-cultural ecumenical engagement. 'Unity in Love' was to display the themes of Christian mutuality and parity, and the service was co-chaired throughout by black and white leaders. A devotional word was offered by Pastor David Douglas of Bethel Apostolic Church, Watford, and the sermon given by the Revd. Harry Morton, General Secretary of the BCC. Martin Conway, of the BCC's Division of Ecumenical Affairs and the organiser, later described it to the Dean of St. Paul's as 'such a happy and successful event'. The only 'fly in the ointment' was a complete lack of media interest. Conway overheard a remark that if the media had been expecting disruption by the National Front, then crowds of reporters might have attended.³ He wrote in the *Baptist Times* the event was:

Twenty years late, because this kind of open, public, mutual demonstration of acceptance ought to have happened in the 1950s as large numbers of West Indians were arriving in this country and as leaders among them were establishing here churches whose traditions and spirituality were rooted in their own culture and appropriate to their needs.⁴

The celebration, however, was a powerful indication of the possibility a new kind of relationship. That the service occurred in the heart of the British Christian establishment, in a building which was historically depicted as the centre of a global spiritual empire, was

² CERC, BCC, DEA, 9/2/5/1, Programme, 'Unity in love: a celebration'.

³ CERC, BCC, DEA, 9/2/5/1, Letter from Martin Conway, 2 November 1979.

⁴ CERC, BCC, DEA, 9/2/3/6, Martin Conway, 'Get to know your neighbours - whoever they are', *Baptist Times*, November 1979.

profoundly symbolic of a reconfiguration of British religiosity through New Commonwealth immigration.⁵

The flourishing of post-1945 British religious history has produced key works on the 1960s and 1970s. In this rich historiography of secularisation, ‘crisis’ in the churches and religious innovation, little has been said about the Black Majority Churches [BMCs].⁶ In recent years the work of David Goodhew and others has challenged aspects of secularisation narratives, proposing that since the 1980s the British churches have been experiencing ‘*both decline and growth*’ and that Britain ‘has grown more secular *and* more religious in the last 30 years’,⁷ with two major factors the new churches and black, Asian and minority ethnic Christianity.⁸ However, notwithstanding this interest in the post-1980 BMCs, and in particular African initiated ‘neo-pentecostalism’, the previous phase of emergence of African-Caribbean pentecostal and holiness churches and African initiated churches have received little attention.⁹ While BMCs were not only a post-war phenomenon in Britain, it was of course in the first three post-Windrush decades they became a marked feature of British Christianity.¹⁰ In 1962 there

⁵ In this article I will refer to ‘British’ Christianity; however, most of the participants discussed were based in England.

⁶ The BMCs tend to be mentioned only fleetingly in various otherwise excellent work; for example, see: Hugh McLeod, *The religious crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 119; Callum Brown, *Religion and society in twentieth-century Britain* (Harlow: Pearson, 2006), 255; 92.

⁷ David Goodhew, ‘Conclusion’ in Goodhew (ed.), *Church growth in Britain: 1980 to the present* (Farnham, 2012), 253.

⁸ Ibid. In the same book, on the BMCs see: Hugh Osgood, ‘The rise of black Churches’, 107-126; Richard Burgess, ‘African Pentecostal growth: the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Britain’, 127-144.

⁹ Roswith Gerloff’s seminal two-volume work is still the most useful historical work: *A plea for British black theologies; the black church movement in Britain in its transatlantic cultural and theological interaction with special reference to the Pentecostal Oneness (Apostolic) and Sabbatarian movements*, 2 vols. (Bern, 1992). There are some historical insights in, for example: Joe Aldred, *Respect: understanding Caribbean British Christianity* (Epworth, 2005); Mark Sturge, *Look what the Lord has done! An exploration of Black Christian faith in Britain* (Bletchley, 2005); E. Foster, ‘Out of this world: a consideration of the development and nature of the Black-led Churches in Britain’, in P. Grant and R. Patel eds., *A time to speak: perspectives of black Christians in Britain* (Birmingham, 1990). There are many substantial social science studies.

¹⁰ In the 1920s, for example, Thomas Brem Wilson, from West Africa, had helped establish a Pentecostal assembly in Walworth, which became known as the “black man’s church” – see David Killingray, ‘Transatlantic networks of early African Pentecostalism: the role of Thomas Brem Wilson, 1901-1929’, *Studies in World Christianity*, 23/3 (2017). 218-36. The labels ‘black-led’ and ‘black majority’ are contested. The former is now rejected by some black Christians as a white liberal category. Both labels can be used in ways which overlook the existence of black majority congregations – which are not the subject of this article – *within* the historic British denominations. On this see, and also some discussion of cross-cultural ecumenism, see John L. Wilkinson, *Church in black and white: the Black Christian tradition in ‘mainstream’ churches in England: a white response and testimony* (Edinburgh, 1993). Furthermore, it has been argued that the labels suggest homogeneity where there is significant historic denominational and theological diversity – see

were reportedly 77 ‘West Indian’ congregations rising to 390 four years later; after which West African immigration also saw the appearance of churches initiated on that continent.¹¹ From the early 1970s, furthermore, ecumenical organisations and sections of the religious and secular press were increasingly aware of the potential significance of this change to the British urban Christian landscape. The religious history of Britain during these decades period needs urgently to fully incorporate the BMCs. Alongside, for example, resilient of Church-State ties, ‘vicarious’ religion and charismatic renewal and restorationism, post-imperial black Christianities have been a vital aspect of the ‘afterlife’ of Christianity in the nation.¹²

One contributing factor for the dearth of research on BMCs in these decades has been a paucity of archival material. However, the hitherto unutilised archives drawn from ecumenical activity, notably the BCC papers and the Roswith Gerloff collection, offer a valuable lens. This article examines a stream of ecumenical interaction between the BCC, an overwhelmingly white organisation with a largely ‘liberal’ – theologically and socially – orientation, and the BMCs. It does so by situating the dialogue in socio-political contexts which included the gradual emergence of an ethos of multiculturalism which challenged the dominant approach of assimilationism and more paternalistic forms of integrationism, and developments in collective black Christian consciousness and assertiveness.¹³ What follows seeks to make a number of contributions to the existing historiography. First, it argues that the history of religious change in British Christianity in the 1960s and 1970s is incomplete without full consideration of the BMCs. Relevant here is not only the growth and diversity of BMCs within British Christianity, but also contemporary *perceptions* of religious change. Recent important work by Sam Brewitt-Taylor has explored discourses of religious change and the emergence – from Christian sources – of a ‘dominant narrative of severe religious decline’ in British life.¹⁴ This article also addresses perceptions and discourses of religious change, but amongst white Christians who

Arlington Trotman ‘Black, Black-led or what?’ in Joel Edwards, *Let’s praise him again: an African Caribbean perspective on worship* (Eastbourne, 1992), 12-35. These are serious considerations. This article uses ‘black-led’ in order to reflect the historical usage; and it also utilises ‘black majority’ on the grounds it has obtained wide currency since adoption, including by the then named Afro-Caribbean Evangelical Alliance in the 1990s. See Sturge, *Look*, 31.

¹¹ See Clifford Hill, *Black churches: West Indian and African sects in Britain* (London, 1971), 4.

¹² ‘Afterlife’ is a term utilised in Daniel S. Loss, ‘The institutional afterlife of Christian England’, *Journal of Modern History*, 89/2 (2017), 282-313. On ‘Vicarious religion’ see Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: a persistent paradox* (Chichester, 2015).

¹³ On assimilationism and multiculturalism, see David Feldman, ‘Why the English like turbans: multicultural politics in British history’ in Feldman and Jon Lawrence, *Structures and transformations in modern British history* (Cambridge, 2011), 285-288.

¹⁴ Sam Brewitt-Taylor, ‘The emergence of Christian secularization narratives, c. 1940-61’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 24/3 (2013), 327-50.

began to see potential of black Christianity as a force for resacralisation; and of black Christians who observed a broader decline of Christian practices and discourses in Britain and sought to respond to a tide of religious and moral decay. Second, whereas existing histories of British ecumenism in this period have focussed largely on discussions around formal union, for example with the formation of the United Reformed Church in 1972 and the failure of Anglican-Methodist dialogue in 1969 and 1972, this article indicates the need for greater recognition of cross-cultural British ecumenism, largely in a relational mode, and with its own successes and limitations.¹⁵ Thirdly, and most substantially, it contributes to the still developing area of research on the role of Christianity in British ‘race relations’ in Britain. The role of white Christian activists, for example Anglican priest Trevor Huddleston, in campaigns against Southern African apartheid and segregation in the American South are increasingly well documented;¹⁶ and important research by Tank Green, and Camilla Schofield and Ben Jones, has discussed the role of radical Methodists in Notting Hill anti-racism community projects.¹⁷ Furthermore, studies are emerging on the Church of England and religious and ethnic pluralism. This, however, has largely addressed attitudes towards non-Christian religious minorities: for example, a landmark piece by David Feldman skilfully uses debates on exceptions for Sikhs in British law in order to trace the roots of a multiculturalism in interactions between politicians, the churches and non-Christian minority religious groups during the 1970s; while other studies survey debates within the established Church concerning multi-racial realities and the sale of places of worship to Sikhs and Muslims.¹⁸ This article,

¹⁵ On British ecumenism, and the failure of ambitions for organic unity, see Martin Camroux, *Ecumenism in retreat: how the United Reformed Church failed to break the mould* (Eugene, 2016).

¹⁶ See for example Rob Skinner, *The Foundations of Anti-Apartheid: Liberal Humanitarians and Transnational Activists in Britain and the United States, c.1919-64*. (New York, 2010); Kennetta Hammond Perry, “‘Little Rock’ in Britain: Jim Crow’s transatlantic topographies”, *Journal of British Studies*, 51/1 (2012), 155-77, at 170-1.

¹⁷ Tank Green, “Digging at Roots and Tugging at Branches: Christians and ‘Race Relations’ in the Sixties” (PhD., University of Exeter, 2016); Camilla Schofield and Ben Jones, “‘Whatever community is, this is not it’: Notting Hill and the reconstruction of “race” in Britain after 1958’ in *Journal of British Studies* (forthcoming).

¹⁸ Feldman, ‘Why the English’; John Maiden, “‘What could be more Christian than to allow the Sikhs to use it? Church redundancy and minority religion in Bedford, 1977-8’ in Charlotte Methuen et al, *Christian and religious pluralism*, Studies in Church History 51 (Woodbridge, 2015), 399-411; Andrew Chandler, *The Church of England in the Twentieth Century: The Church Commissioners and the Politics of Reform, 1948–1998* (Woodbridge, 2006), 231–9. Important work by Matthew Grimley and Peter Webster surveys institutional Anglican responses to ‘racial’ (and religious) plurality, but the former discusses both Christian and non-Christian immigrant communities and relatively little is said about the BMCs, and Webster’s focus is other faiths. See Grimley, ‘The Church of England, race and multi-culturalism, 1962-2012’ in Jane Garnett and Alana Harris, *Rescripting religion in the city: migration and religious identity in the modern metropolis* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), ch. 12; Webster,

however, discusses a parallel emergence of a Christian ecumenical multiculturalism, and the black and white contributions to its development. While the historiography of British religion in 1960s and 1970s has very largely failed to address the significance of the black-led churches, many of the historic actors involved in this dialogue were very aware of the changing contemporary dynamics of religious change.

“nothing less than apartheid”: the background of cross-cultural Christian relations

The post-war years saw a stark contrast in African-Caribbean church attendance. A landmark 1963 study found that despite the high levels of attendance to Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Congregationalist, Presbyterian or Roman Catholic churches in the Caribbean, only 4% (2,563) of immigrants attended these churches in Greater London.¹⁹ In the immigrant centres of London, Birmingham and Manchester, the picture was mixed. A small number of newcomers settled in mainline churches; many, like the working classes of which they were overwhelmingly a part, did not attend church at all; but others were increasingly drawn to inchoate black Christian gatherings. Single-factor interpretations of the development of these churches are grossly inadequate.²⁰ As social scientists noticed the appearance of black ‘sects’ in the mid-1960s, they drew on the theoretical explanation of relative deprivation. Malcom Calley argued: ‘The thoroughgoing obsessive, ritual withdrawal of the saint from the world appears to be out of all proportion to the actual difficulty of the situation he is withdrawing from. I think this can only be understood historically [...] There is in the West Indies a long tradition of seeking magico-religious rather than practical solutions to problems.’²¹ Studies tended to underestimate experiences of white Christian prejudice, a reality to which various later reminiscences of ethnic minority Christian leaders attested.²² Philip Mohabir, a pentecostal missionary who arrived in London from British Guiana in 1956, described black

‘Race, religion and national identity in sixties Britain: Michael Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury, and his encounter with other faiths’ in Methuen, *Christian*, 385-98.

¹⁹ Clifford Hill, *West Indian migrants and the London churches* (Oxford, 1963), 22-3. The total percentage of immigrants with whom these denominations were in touch was 8% (20).

²⁰ On this point see R. David Muir, ‘Black theology, pentecostalism and racial struggles in the Church of God’ (Ph.D, King’s College London, 2003), ch. 1.

²¹ Malcolm Calley, *God’s people. West Indian Pentecostal sects in England* (London, 1965), 145. See also Ari Kiev, ‘Psychotherapeutic aspects of Pentecostal sects among West Indian immigrants to England’, *British Journal of Sociology*, 15/2 (1964), 129-138.

²² See, for example, Io Smith, *An ebony cross: being a black Christian in Britain today* (London, 1989), 40-1; Philip Mohabir, *Building bridges: a dramatic personal story of reconciliation and evangelism* (London, 1988).

immigrants in the streets and market-places of Brixton as ‘like sheep, distressed, weary and downcast and without a shepherd’. Men and women tearfully informed him they were ‘starved for real Christian warmth and fellowship’ and reported ‘unpleasant experiences’ in the white churches.²³ Often a sense of cultural dissonance seemed evident: ‘the hymns and the liturgy were almost the same as they used to be, but the atmosphere was dull, the singing dry [...] the preaching cold and calculated.’²⁴ In other cases, African-Caribbean people received a more generous welcome. Recent scholarship indicates a range of white church responses to these newly arrived Christians ranging from overt hostility, to a certain coolness, thoughtlessness or inflexibility (which, whether deliberate or unintended, had the same negative impact), to a level of openness which appears more socially progressive than much of wider society.²⁵

Mission and tradition also played important roles in the formation of BMCs. In the 1950s church planters were active in establishing bed-sit gatherings – “churches in the home” formed in the camaraderie of sharing living space.²⁶ The same decade saw the appearance of denominations which transplanted pentecostal and holiness traditions, indigenised in the Caribbean, and usually under the oversight of either a white or black-dominated mother church in the United States. The Pilgrim (Wesleyan) Holiness Church, headquarters Indiana, for example, was established in Birmingham in 1959 after Dennis Sampson came from Antigua specifically in order to share the gospel.²⁷ When Jeremiah McIntyre arrived in the country in March 1956, his denomination, the New Testament Church of God [NTCG], part of the white-dominated Church of God in Cleveland, Tennessee, had already been established. McIntyre, who had been a minister for six years, came from Jamaica to offer pastoral help having received correspondence from migrants describing a lack of fellowship and disunity.²⁸ ‘Oneness’ (Apostolic) pentecostalism – a tradition which practiced baptism in ‘Jesus Name’ rather than Trinitarian liturgical formula – was also established, with some congregations linking with R. A. Carr’s black Rehoboth Church of God in Christ Apostolic in Baltimore, from 1957 (a

²³ Mohabir, *Building bridges*, 61; 68.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁵ This is articulated in Ian Jones, *The local churches and generational change in Birmingham, 1945-2000* (Woodbridge, 2014), 132-4. See also C. Taylor, ‘British churches and Jamaican migration: a study of religion and identities, 1948-65’, University of Anglia Ph.D., 2002.

²⁶ Mohabir, *Building bridges*, 71, 74.

²⁷ Foster, ‘Out of this world’, 58-9.

²⁸ CERC, BCC, Division of Community Affairs [DCA], 7/5/36, Jeremiah McIntyre, ‘Black churches in white cities’, Evangelical Race Relations Group conference ‘Integration and the Church’, 26 January 1974.

schism eight years later saw most of the English congregations link with the Full United Church of Jesus Christ Apostolic).²⁹ Alongside larger bodies, many smaller denominations with organisational connections to the Caribbean appeared; for example, in 1958, the Church of the First Born, with its headquarters in Kingston, Jamaica. There then emerged various independent bodies, many in the 'Oneness' tradition and operating on a congregational basis, such as Bethel Apostolic Church, in South London and Watford and Shiloh United Church of Christ (Apostolic). Shiloh soon adopted an episcopal system, according to Roswith Gerloff in order to secure greater 'legitimacy' in British society.³⁰ From the mid-1960s West African immigrants established what were sometimes known as 'spiritual churches', such as the Musama Disco Christo Church, the Church of the Lord (Aladura) and branches of the Cherubim and Seraphim. 'Pentecostal' in their emphasis on the Spirit, these displayed unique syntheses of Christian belief and form with the cosmological and ritual concepts of African traditional religions.

As this was underway, reported experiences of cross-cultural ecumenical relations varied but were often marked by prejudices or by ambivalences. As one black pentecostal (Apostolic) minister remarked of London in the late 1960s, 'there was little interest among the Black Churches in links with white churches, or vice-versa'.³¹ In Birmingham black and white ministers were 'not on speaking terms'.³² While overt racism was sometimes a factor, perceptions of difference in class, theology, moral expectations and custom could contribute. Many black leaders were working priests, sometimes employed full-time, often in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, which could make attendance (at least when they were welcome) at local ministers' fraternal meetings difficult.³³ Black church exclusivity was sometimes perceived as a barrier. One Anglican vicar was reported to have been in contact with a pentecostal pastor in South London who to his disappointment seemed 'did not wish to worship with white people'; apparently 'it was not just the Church of England whose worship they did not like, but even our own Pentecostal Assemblies.'³⁴ Where insularity was preferred, no doubt the experience of white racism, or a preoccupation with immediate social challenges, might contribute, as could differing theological emphases or moral expectations. A later BCC report described African-Caribbean people as 'warm and friendly' but warned white churches not to

²⁹ Gerloff, *A Plea*, vol. 1, 240-41.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 242-3.

³¹ Brian Cooper, 'Partnership in Christ is the only hope', *CWN Series*, 15 September 1978, 11.

³² Gerloff, *A Plea*, vol. 1, 45.

³³ Laurie Skilton, 'West Indian scenario', *Renewal*, October/November 1978, no. 77, 36-8.

³⁴ David Edgington, *Christians and colour in Britain* (London, 1970), 112.

‘expect too much too soon’ in cooperation with BMCs, which were said to have ‘more in common with the English Gospel Hall or the Brethren than with the mainstream churches.’³⁵ Yet, as one white observer remarked in 1982, white congregations had imbibed talks by missionaries on furlough which were ‘flavoured with the hint that there was something slightly inferior about these “native Christians” which would be remedied in due course by education and teaching from the West.’³⁶ BMC leaders reported white clergy viewing their churches as theologically eccentric or unnecessarily loud, or displaying an ecclesiastical snobbery whereby they were seen as ‘self-styled’, ‘self-ordained’ or incapable.³⁷ “Welcome to our little black friends!” was a greeting one pastor recalled at a meeting of white ministers.³⁸

The primary interface was the negotiation of church buildings for rent or purchase. Some BMCs had begun renting existing church sanctuaries or halls in the late 1950s, but in the 1970s increased demand for space due to fuel crises and strike actions by school caretakers resulted in congregations having to vacate school premises and approaching white clergy for accommodation.³⁹ As a group of white clergy described the situation in 1977: ‘The first stage in relation between “them and us”, is a financial one: they need to borrow our buildings.’⁴⁰ Wendy Webster has suggested a common white narrative by the 1960s was of ‘anxieties about collapsing boundaries’ between the ‘host’ and the ‘immigrant’. For many, English homes and families – quiet, domesticated, tidy and ordered – seemed under siege from ‘dark strangers’. When, for example, Elspeth Huxley observed migrant life in Brixton for *Punch*, she described local concerns based on stereotypes of the loud music and untidiness of immigrants.⁴¹ Given these anxieties and prejudices about the collapsing ‘internal frontiers’ of Englishness, it is not surprising to see similar attitudes in the religious sphere – the protection of sacred space from black Christians and their ‘exotic’ worship styles. In Birmingham in the early 1970s, Roswith Gerloff recalled one Anglican church council anxious not to lose ‘respectability’ by sharing

³⁵ Gillian Carver, *A place to meet: the use of church property and the new religious minorities in Britain*, BCC/CRRU (London, 1978), 17.

³⁶ Tony Dumper, ‘The churches need the Centre for Black and White Christian partnership’, *Christian Action Journal*, Autumn 1982, 4-5.

³⁷ David Douglas (ed. Sheila Douglas), *Pentecostalism and immigration* (London, 2008), 68.

³⁸ Cooper, “Partnership in Christ”.

³⁹ Carver, *A Place*, 15.

⁴⁰ CERC, BCC, DCA, CRRU, 2/2/a, ‘The Church: its resources and their deployment: group report’, September 1977.

⁴¹ Wendy Webster, ‘The empire comes home: Commonwealth migration in Britain’ in Andrew Thompson (ed.), *Britain’s experience of empire in the twentieth century* (Oxford, 2011), 145-6; Elsbeth Huxley, *Back street new worlds: a look at immigrants in Britain* (London, 1964), 46-7. See also Wendy Webster, *Englishness and empire, 1939-1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), ch. 6.

with an African-Caribbean church, and a Baptist church fearing black Christians as communists and homosexuals.⁴²

Where space sharing did occur, black leaders frequently complained of high rent, poor conditions, or the sudden sale of the premises to commercial buyers. Bishop Malachi Ramsey of Shiloh United Church of Christ (Apostolic), Croydon, described having been since 1968 a 'travelling congregation', moving between church hall, a Toc-H centre, a school hall, an Anglican church hall (mornings) and sanctuary (evenings) and then, in 1976, a derelict property found by the council. He recalled before services in a church hall 'Sweeping out the dog-ends and scrubbing the floor, spraying out the Smoking and Spilt beer and Paying over £40.00 per month.'⁴³ In general, the basis of arrangement was almost always a landlord-tenant model. In some cases, experiences described by black clergy had striking parallels with those arising from dealing with white landlords and sellers in the housing market.⁴⁴ Some black congregations, white leaders suggested, did not appreciate the high cost of maintaining cold and decaying Victorian church buildings (which often belonged to dwindling working-class congregations).⁴⁵ The timing and length of worship could produce tensions. "At home", explained one African-Caribbean pastor, "if the Spirit moved us our service might go on till one or two in the morning. Here, of course, we have to be out of the hall by 9.30."⁴⁶ The negotiation of buildings tended to highlight the distance between black and white majority congregations, even as they shared space. As Colin Winter, the exiled Bishop of Namibia, reported of Lewisham in 1977, 'Church life...is characterised by struggling denominations with a number of well-attended, lively black churches, often using the same buildings but rarely meeting.'⁴⁷

Other factors could influence the attitudes of white clergy. Some were ambivalent about the black churches because of their own 'liberal' anxieties about the social and ecclesiological risks of so-called ghettoization. White liberals often took pride in distinguishing British race relations from the racist practices apparent the American South and South Africa.⁴⁸ The race relations discourse of social scientists such as Kenneth Little and Michael Banton emphasised

⁴² Gerloff, *A Plea*, vol. 1, 46.

⁴³ Malachi Ramsey, 'Bishop Ramsey Appeal', *West Indian World*, 26 May 1978.

⁴⁴ On the experience of housing, see Schofield and Jones, ' "Whatever community is" '.

⁴⁵ Carver, *A place*, 17.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Carver, *A place*, 15.

⁴⁷ Peter Scott, 'Lewisham's legacy', *Third Way*, 8 September 1977, 11.

⁴⁸ Webster, 'Empire', 130.

the need for cross-cultural contact between white and black communities.⁴⁹ Banton warned against “the creation of English Harlems”.⁵⁰ The Notting Hill and Nottingham riots of 1958 heightened this emphasis, contributing to pressure for municipal policies such as ‘bussing’ of immigrant children to specific schools from 1963 and later various dispersal policies in housing, aimed at promoting assimilation and preventing ghettoization.⁵¹ Some white Christians saw the aggregation of black Christians in their ‘sects’ as a worrying development. ‘The real danger of this movement’, it was argued, ‘is not merely that it represents a measure of religious apartheid which in itself could have serious consequences in the future, especially if the children of immigrants continued to adhere to these all-coloured congregations, but that the growth of this movement reflects the measure of the failure of the English churches.’⁵²

Strong echoes of such concerns were evident in the witness of the Revd. Norwyn Denny, a member of the Methodist team ministry in Notting Hill, London, and leading figure in efforts to promote radically cross-cultural and activist forms Christian community based on the concept of *koinonia* in the early Church (including setting up ‘house churches’ under the auspices of the Methodist Team Ministry which were popular with black immigrants) in the 1960s.⁵³ By the early 1970s Denny was also attempting to reach out to black churches in his area, including some sharing of buildings and pulpits. Yet, he also felt ambivalences about them. While, for Denny, these churches were another example of the ‘natural’ gathering of alike people, just as Scottish or Welsh churches in the big English cities, and their growth was in a large part the fault of the English churches, they did not reflect the radical cultural diversity of New Testament Christianity. He warned of the dangers of isolationism – of a ‘full apartheid system’ in the churches – and argued it was unlikely that unity between white and black churches would simply be obtained further down the line. There were ambivalences too concerning the characteristics of the black churches. While Denny had sought to promote ministry of black church leaders and white clergy in Notting Hill on the basis of being ‘equals’,

⁴⁹ Chris Waters, “‘Dark strangers’ in our midst: discourses of race and nation in Britain, 1947-1963”, *Journal of British Studies*, 36/2 (1997), 207-238, at 231

⁵⁰ Michael Banton, *The coloured quarter: Negro immigrants in an English city* (London, 1955), 250; quoted in Waters, “‘Dark strangers’”, 231.

⁵¹ On this see, Feldman, ‘Why’, 286; Winston James, ‘Migration, racism and identity formation: the Caribbean experience in Britain’ in James and Clive Harris, *Inside Babylon: the Caribbean diaspora in Britain* (London, 1993), 260-62. Feldman argues in the 1960s ‘Immigration policy was also assimilation policy’ (285).

⁵² Clifford Hill, ‘The role of Christians’ in Clifford Hill and David Matthews, *Race: a Christian symposium* (London, 1968), 183.

⁵³ On the Methodist team ministry in Notting Hill see Schofield and Jones’s forthcoming, “‘Whatever community is’”.

he was highly critical of the theology of the black churches, warning it might prevent the theological progress of black young people. The retreat of these churches into ‘spirit-religion’, he argued, prevented real confrontation with social and political issues. Denny certainly saw within black Christianity the power for religious resurgence but bemoaned the English churches for not properly integrating migrants and so missing the century’s greatest opportunity for *revival*. Christians from abroad, he argued, brought ‘powerful worship’, ‘spontaneous leadership’ and an ‘experimental approach’, which the English churches might have channelled. Denny’s suggestion was that the Home and Overseas Mission departments of the Methodist Church should do more to engage with migrants in the inner cities, to arrange for black leaders from abroad to be placed in white church contexts and ‘make hell there’.⁵⁴ The undesirability of religious ghettoization, as we shall see, was to be a recurrent theme in white Christian consideration of the BMCs.

“black and white is a sweet society”: the emergence of dialogue

In April 1968 the *Guardian* published one of the first national news stories on what it called the ‘many Negro sects’ in England. The journalist spoke of the religious ‘conviction’ he observed during the service of the Church of God of Prophecy, Willesden.⁵⁵ In the decade which followed, there were signs of development in white liberal circles of a more nuanced awareness and understanding of the BMCs and their various traditions. Alongside this was the growth of more assertive and public forms of collective black Christian consciousness. Both contributed to the conditions in which ecumenical dialogue took place.

The international and national ecumenical context was important, as the World Council of Churches (whose invited keynote speaker for its Uppsala conference in 1968, Martin Luther King, was assassinated only weeks before) began to encourage denominations to consider racism the legacy of colonial histories.⁵⁶ In 1969 it convened a Consultation on Racism and the same year the Central Committee of the WCC was amongst the first bodies to speak of

⁵⁴ Northampton, New Testament Church of God Heritage Centre [NTCG], Roswith Gerloff Archive [RGA], Norwyn Denny, ‘Black self-consciousness and the local church’.

⁵⁵ Terry Coleman, *Guardian*, 15 April 1968, 14.

⁵⁶ See Kevin Myers, ‘Faith in history: memory, multiculturalism and the legacies of empire in post war England’, *History of Education*, 40/6 (2011), 779-793, at 10.

‘institutional racism’.⁵⁷ In 1975 a WCC consultation in Geneva explored the ubiquity of racism in both society and church. The BCC increasingly sought to face the realities of a multi-racial society. *The New Black Presence in Britain* (1976) examined black social alienation; highly critical of the historic British churches as having ‘connived at a system in which some people have been relegated to the margins of society and deprived of a voice.’⁵⁸ Another BCC initiative was a Community and Race Relations Unit (CRRU) working party on the use of church property in multi-racial contexts. In the Church of England, for example, where the Pastoral Measure of 1968 had legitimised the sale of consecrated church buildings for other uses, there was considerable debate around the use or sale of sanctuaries and ancillary buildings by non-Christian minorities.⁵⁹ During the CCRU discussions, for example, the Revd Canon Douglas Webster of the Church Missionary Society argued that ‘The effectiveness of the Christian mission rests on the truth of the Christian Gospel, not on privileges for the Church or on restriction of its opponents’ and that in the context of a multi-racial society ‘Two things need to be remembered. The Gospel was launched in a highly competitive world (from a religious point of view); the truth needs proclaiming rather than protecting.’⁶⁰ But what of minority ethnic Christian congregations? Amongst the evidence presented during the CRRU working party discussions was a letter from David Douglas, the pastor of Bethel Apostolic Church, Watford. Douglas, who was Jamaican born and had moved to England in 1957, was a working pastor, his church salary initially paid by two wage earners in the congregation. The congregation met in a school, meaning Douglas could not officiate marriage ceremonies and used a local swimming pool for baptisms. Lack of available space in places like Brixton, Stoke Newington and Islington, he also argued, had contributed to the proliferation of small meetings, sometimes in cellars, often with untrained leaders. This, he said, contributed to a situation which was detrimental to both ‘integration’ and ‘church reformation’.⁶¹ Amongst the recommendations of a 1973 interim report by the working party was that church premises be made available to minority Christian groups for worship, ‘even when this involves financial sacrifice by the host community.’⁶² These BCC initiatives did little to engage directly with

⁵⁷ Kenneth Leach, *Race* (London, 2005), 105.

⁵⁸ *The new black presence in Britain: a Christian scrutiny* (London, 1976), 28.

⁵⁹ Maiden, “‘What could be more Christian?’”, 401.

⁶⁰ CERC, BCC, DCA, CRRU, 7/5/7, Douglas Webster, ‘Should a redundant church be disposed of to people of another faith?’, March 1972.

⁶¹ CERC, BCC, DCA, CRRU, 7/4/7, Copy of letter from David Douglas, May 1972.

⁶² *The use of church properties for community activities in multi-racial areas*, BCC/CRRU (London, 1973).

BMC leaders but indicated an increasing commitment to engagement with Christian and non-Christian minorities.

Although *The New Black Presence in Britain* hardly mentioned BMCs, it did urge “mainstream” churches to begin to ‘express fellowship’ with them.⁶³ Furthermore, during the early 1970s, within the orbit of the BCC there were various local interactions which later provided contacts for higher-level dialogue. In 1971, Dr Clifford Hill, a evangelical Congregational minister and sociologist, published *Black Churches: West Indian and African Sects in Britain* under the auspices of the BCC’s CRRU. Hill was actively involved in Christian engagement in race and community relations in North East London, where he helped found the Newham Community Renewal Programme. The booklet, which included case studies on the NTCG and the West African Cherubim and Seraphim, was notable in a number of ways. Hill stated: ‘While there are strong and valid social-cultural reasons for the absence of black people in the English churches the greatest single reason is that white Christians DO NOT WANT THEM.’ This recognition of white Christian racism became an important theme of later dialogue. Another, though, was identification of the potential ramifications for this minority ethnic ‘urban evangelical explosion’. He wrote: ‘while English church leaders have been vainly trying to rally support to prop up the tottering foundations of traditional white christianity [sic] a quiet revolution has been taking place among Britain’s black Christians in the unfashionable back streets of our towns and cities.’⁶⁴ A BCC one-day seminar on the book followed, and included four BMC delegates.⁶⁵ The book received some attention in the mainline denominations.⁶⁶

A further development, in 1975, was the Zebra Project. This was based in the Bow Mission in the London North-East District of the Methodist Church, an area with a strong ‘radical Methodist’ pedigree. Zebra fostered grassroots ecumenism in the multi-racial context.⁶⁷ The BCC and NTCG became supporting bodies, with Phyllis Thompson of the NTCG joining the leadership team. Its early initiatives included the Sing Joy Together ‘worship experience’ meetings, which attracted churches across Bow and Hackney to share musical items from different religious and cultural backgrounds, ‘ranging from traditional anthems, through neo-

⁶³ *New black presence*, 33

⁶⁴ Hill, *Black churches*, 3.

⁶⁵ CERC, BCC, DCA, CRRU, 7/3/21, List of Participants, one-day seminar, 2 Dec 1971.

⁶⁶ CERC, BCC, DCA, CRRU, 7/3/21, David Sheppard, ‘Black Churches’, *Southwark news* (diocesan newsletter), February 1972.

⁶⁷ *The Zebra Project: A way across the road* (London, 1976). On Zebra see also Myers, ‘Faith in History’.

pentecostal choruses to gospel choirs.’⁶⁸ Pioneering in its approach, the events were arranged in such a way to avoid one group playing the role of ‘host’ and the other of ‘guest’ – thus undermining categories widely evidence in earlier race relations initiatives and writings.⁶⁹ Zebra was conscious of ignorance or prejudices as barriers to fellowship. Black churches were often stereotyped as ‘noisy, authoritarian structured, “over-spiritual” congregations with unqualified and self-appointed leaders’, while in the reverse white churches, it argued, could be stereotyped as ‘cold (in reception and worship style) congregations which over-emphasise intellectual qualifications in their leadership and have forgotten spiritual concern in their wholly social work orientation.’ Black clergy might fear the dominance of white leaders, who might in return feel intimidated by the growth of black congregations.⁷⁰ Such prejudices or anxieties could be overcome by education and interaction. ‘It is our differences which enrich us; we explore differences for our mutual benefit’, project worker Paul Charman later asserted.⁷¹ Zebra promoted the experience of religious plurality as a component of the multicultural society, not least because black church leaders might be points of community contact for social activism. In Birmingham, also, there were local ecumenical openings. The Central Bible Institute, established in 1973 to train young black leaders, included teaching by white Christian leaders. The Birmingham Council of Christian Churches made attempts to bring clergy together, briefly employing Roswith Gerloff for this purpose, though she found this a difficult process to facilitate.⁷² A Lutheran pastor based in Oxford, Gerloff would also conduct doctoral research under Walter Hollenweger, at the University of Birmingham, on the BMCs. She would recall visiting ‘Afro-Caribbean churches, only equipped with a map, a caretaker’s telephone directory, and a car, following people in their Sunday dress into schools and sports halls in Birmingham’.⁷³ She was to play an important role in developing ecumenical dialogue. BMC leaders were not only responding to white initiative. Some were more vocally asserting the legitimacy of the black churches within the British context. In 1970, for example, the *British Weekly* published interviews with the South African-born Revd. Moses Sephula, who was planting an African Methodist Episcopal Church congregation in London. He spoke of Black

⁶⁸ NTCG, RGA, Zebra project file, Newham Sing Joy, information sheet.

⁶⁹ *Together: the Zebra Project: a Progress Report* (London, 1976), 2. On ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’ (or ‘strangers’) in race relations writings, see Waters, “Dark strangers”, 224; 234.

⁷⁰ CERC, BCC, DCA, CRRU, 7/3/18, Report to Advisory Group of Zebra Project, 12 January 1976.

⁷¹ Paul Charman, *Reflections: black and white Christians in the city* (London, 1979), 30.

⁷² CERC, BCC, DCA, CRRU, 7/3/21, M. Waters to Janet Henderson, 16 August 1974. The letter included a copy of Gerloff’s report.

⁷³ Roswith Gerloff, ‘Editorial’, *Christian Action Journal*, Autumn 1982, 3.

theology as ‘the distinctive Christian dimension of the struggle of the people’⁷⁴, condemning the idea that ‘the black man must learn everything, including his churchmanship, from the white man’, and stated: ‘I would not talk first about “integration”, and certainly not about “assimilation”, but rather about the “self-development” of the black man.’⁷⁵ Oneness pentecostals, who operated within a tradition of radical social involvement and critique, were particularly active in seeking closer ecumenical relations.⁷⁶ As Malachi Ramsey, who founded the Croydon Race and Community Organisation Unit Trust, asserted in 1975: ‘We want our white brothers and sisters to know that we need them now, and this is urgent. We have something to offer. You have something to offer. Black and White is a sweet society like the Father, Son and Holy Spirit [...] making a complete unanimity [...] to be a better witness to the world!’⁷⁷ Similarly, David Douglas, a prominent voice in the Watford Race Representative Organisation – a multi-cultural citizens’ advice bureau – developed local links with Baptists and even Roman Catholics.⁷⁸ Douglas, importantly, was concerned also for unity amongst BMCs and so to diminish theological barriers between Oneness and Trinitarian pentecostals, between Caribbean island identities, and even between African initiated churches and African-Caribbean pentecostal and holiness churches. Such unity might act as a precursor for ecumenical engagement with the historic mainline churches. With Ramsey, Douglas had a leading role in the development of the International Ministerial Council of Great Britain in Britain (IMCGB) from 1968, which became a federation of black-led churches, conceived by Oneness pentecostals but coming to represent a spectrum of churches and aiming to promote their concord, but also partnership with the mainstream churches in order to further Christian unity and parity of influence and resources.⁷⁹

Gerloff and David Douglas were instrumental in the initiation of wider dialogue under the auspices of the BCC. A committed ecumenist as well as a scholar, Gerloff developed rich data on the theological and denominational distinctives of different churches and an unparalleled network of contacts. In a ground-breaking paper on Birmingham BMCs published in 1975, she described ‘a colourful picture, a mosaic, a joining together of different theological-doctrinal,

⁷⁴ Brian Cooper, ‘Black theology’, *British Weekly*, 29 Jan 1970, 7.

⁷⁵ Brian Cooper, ‘Racial Separation’, *British Weekly*, 5 February 1970, 5.

⁷⁶ Gerloff, *A plea*, 261

⁷⁷ International Ministerial Council of Great Britain leaflet (1975) quoted in Roswith Gerloff, ‘Partnership in black and white: a test-case for the mission of the British Churches’ in *Partnership in black and white* (London, 1977), 10.

⁷⁸ Douglas, *Pentecostalism*, 64-5. Cooper, “‘Partnership”.

⁷⁹ Douglas, *Pentecostalism*, 24-5; *Handbook of the International Ministerial Council of Great Britain*, revd edn. (London, 1990), 5.

and socio-economic approaches to reality.’⁸⁰ Gerloff came to be seen in BCC circles as ‘Our great expert in this whole field’.⁸¹ Douglas had first approached John Leake, secretary of the BCC Division of Ecumenical Affairs (DEA) in 1969/70, seeking amongst other matters to discuss associate membership for the IMCGB.⁸² He became a close contact of Gerloff who along with other BCC staff began to visit the work in Watford. Discussions continued after Martin Conway replaced Leake following his death in 1974. Conway, returning from working for the WCC in Geneva, became conscious black and white churches ‘were in no sense aware of each other’.⁸³ From this nexus of relationships emerged the idea for a consultation with leaders of black-led churches, held at Dartmouth House, Lewisham, in September 1976.⁸⁴ While the chief focus was cross-cultural Christian unity, that the event occurred only a few months after serious riots at the Notting Hill Carnival would have been an immediate reminder of the wider ‘race relations’ situation.

Specifically, the aim of this gathering was to prepare a paper, initially drafted by Gerloff, discussing ‘relationships between the largely white (mainstream, historic, traditional, native, etc.) churches in this country and the largely black (newly established, immigrant, spiritual, often pentecostal, etc.) churches’.⁸⁵ The CRRU and DEA worked together, with Conway, Gerloff, Paul Charman (Zebra), Elliott Kendall (CRRU), Clifford Hill and Gus John, an African-Caribbean community activist (and a key voice in the *The New Black Presence in Britain*), amongst those attending for the BCC. The BMC representatives were David Douglas, Moses Sephula, Ira Brooks (New Testament Church of God), S. E. Reynolds and Alvin Blake (Calvary Church of God in Christ), Herbert Sealey (Pilgrim Wesleyan Holiness Church), Martin Simmonds (First United Church of Christ Apostolic), and A. Walters (Shiloh Pentecostal Fellowship). There was also a presentation from Bena-Silu, of the Kimbanguist Church, who described both the colonial experience and engagement with the WCC, which it had joined in 1969. From the perspective of intra-black Christian unity, it was significant that both Oneness and Trinitarian traditions were represented, along with the Holiness strand; and

⁸⁰ Roswith Gerloff, ‘Black Christian communities in Birmingham: the problem of basic recognition’ in Alan Bryman (ed.), *Religion in the Birmingham area: essays in the Sociology of Religion* (Birmingham, 1975), 61–84.

⁸¹ CERC, BCC, DEA, 9/2/3/6, Martin Conway to Revd John Padwick, 20 February 1978.

⁸² Brian Cooper, “‘Partnership’”; Douglas, *Pentecostalism*, 65.

⁸³ Interview with Dr Martin Conway.

⁸⁴ CERC, BCC, DCA, CRRU, 10/3/6, ‘Matters of information’, *CRRU Newsletter*, no 6, Sept 1976, 4.

⁸⁵ Martin Conway, ‘White and black churches’ invitation, June 1976.

although no African initiated church representatives were unable to attend, at least one was invited.

A record of the meeting indicates a frank and often tense discussion of post-Windrush Christian relations. The immediate results were two-fold. First, an agreed recommendation that the BCC should establish a Joint Working Party of Black-led and White-led Churches should be established to 'look afresh into questions concerning the use and sharing of church buildings, and into possibilities of mutual exchange in the spiritual and educational resources available to the churches'.⁸⁶ Second, the Gerloff paper, an insightful overview of the historical and theological distinctiveness and diversity of black Christianity, was redrafted to be presented, alongside a short paper by Martin Simmonds, to the BCC 5th Assembly in order to contextualise the recommendation. These were published later published, including other testimonies by white, African-Caribbean and African leaders, as a booklet for white-led churches, *Partnership in Black and White: a Test Case for the Mission of British Churches* (1977). The Dartmouth House recommendation was also taken to a meeting of around seventy 'properly authorised delegates' of BMCs at Calvary Church of God, Luton – a gathering which also included leaders of African initiated churches.⁸⁷ This was the largest and most diverse meeting of the BMCs in Britain to that date. The nomenclature 'black-led churches' was adopted.⁸⁸ Here, representatives were selected to join the Joint Working Party, which was to be co-chaired by Sephula and Hewlett Thompson, the Anglican Bishop of Willesden. This group sat between 1977 and 1980 with most meetings in London and Birmingham. Its meetings focussed largely on the co-production of three reports, discussed below, on specific key issues identified at Lewisham and Luton. It provided also opportunities for ecumenical discussion around theological perspectives, for example understandings of the work of the Holy Spirit, current topics, including immigration reform.⁸⁹

“Partnership not paternalism”: from Dartmouth House to St Paul’s Cathedral

⁸⁶ CERC, BCC, DEA, 9/2/5/2, Minutes of a conference of representatives of black-led churches, 30 October 1976.

⁸⁷ CERC, BCC, DEA, 9/2/5/1, Draft of letter to be sent to leaders of black-led churches, 8 September 1976.

⁸⁸ CERC, BCC, DEA, 9/2/5/2, Invitation to black-led church leaders, 5 October 1976.

⁸⁹ CERC, BCC, DEA, 9/2/5/1, Minutes of Joint Working Party between Black-led and White-led churches [hereafter JWP], 7 October 1978; 15 December 1979.

The order of service for Dartmouth House included the prayer ‘Let us confess our share in that sinfulness which causes disunity, division and strife: for our pride of race (white or black): for our pride of our own denomination and tradition and intolerance to that of other brethren in Christ.’⁹⁰ The key theme of the dialogue was Christian mutuality. This was a step which required - as the prayer declared - repentance, but also an agreed language for interaction and an ideological basis for these relations. The Gerloff paper asserted that white British Christians could not merely make the South Africans and Americans ‘the “whipping” boys’ for racism. Instead white churches needed a collective introspectiveness in order to identify personal and institutional racism.⁹¹ In the discussion, Douglas addressed this issue head on, relating his experience of some white clergy resisting engagement. ‘Why? Can we be honest enough to say?’ he apparently asked.⁹² The system of racial injustice which pervaded education and employment also, he argued, shaped the churches.⁹³ It was commented that white leaders’ diaries were always ‘full’, or invitations to preach in black churches were declined in case reciprocal arrangements were expected.⁹⁴ Gerloff argued for the need for ‘basic recognition, both acknowledgement and appreciation’ of black Christians and churches.⁹⁵ Yet such ‘recognition’ also required some agreed terminology. There were complicated considerations here, as there was concern that labels should neither imply Christian exclusivity nor the homogeneity of the BMCs. According to Conway, the use of ‘black-led’ and ‘white-led’ was preferred to ‘black’ or ‘white’ by the Joint Working Party in order ‘to point to the fact that whatever the colour of members there was a fairly clear difference in style of the church according to the colour of its leadership.’ It was recognised that sometimes ‘West Indian Pentecostal’ or ‘African Independent’ was preferable, but these too could be misleading. Conway hoped that, in time, each church could be treated ‘by itself and for itself’ but suggested ‘one cannot avoid using generalising labels.’⁹⁶

Gerloff argued that if white Christians were more aware of the diverse histories and traditions of the black-led churches – and also their significance as part of a ‘suffering’ Church – they

⁹⁰ CERC, BCC, DCA, CRRU, 7/3/18, Order of service, white and black churches consultation 1 Sept 1976.

⁹¹ CERC, BCC, DCA, 7/3/18, ‘Black immigration and the role of the British churches’, 1-2.

⁹² CERC, BCC, DEA, 9/2/5/1(6), Martin Conway, notes of DEA/CRRU Dartmouth House meeting, 1-2 September 1976 [hereafter: Dartmouth House meeting]. This consists of handwritten notes of the discussion by Martin Conway; these appear to be thorough, but not necessarily verbatim, records.

⁹³ Dartmouth House meeting, 3.

⁹⁴ Dartmouth House meeting, 10.

⁹⁵ Gerloff, ‘Black immigration’, 3.

⁹⁶ CERC, BCC, DEA, 9/2/3/6, Martin Conway to Cecily Hoof, 25 September 1979.

could be less easily marginalised or dismissed as inauthentic. They should be ‘equal partners on the platform of British Christianity’.⁹⁷ Dartmouth House saw various black leaders critical of white paternalism. Ira Brooks apparently spoke of the experience of white churches ‘strangling’ him in their own theology, suggesting that a legacy of white dominance was that white leaders expected black Christians to see God as white (‘leaders I can see God through my own eyes...and you too’).⁹⁸ He asserted the need for recognition and respect at a deeper, spiritual level – and not white ‘entertainment’ from black choirs.⁹⁹ There was also a wariness of the notion of ‘recognition’. Some representatives of the BCC, too, were uncomfortable with language which might imply that white churches were superior. The language of ‘partnership’ – or of what Douglas described as ‘working together in [the] Christian sense’ – was agreed.¹⁰⁰ He wrote of this partnership: ‘There will be no problems for the Black Churches in Britain to enter into partnership if the white-ruled, high, mighty, rich, established, bureaucratic Churches will only share the way Christ meant us to share, as Christians, having all things in common [...]’.¹⁰¹ From a white Christian perspective, the Church Missionary Society’s *Yes* magazine later explained:

The black churches want “partnership not paternalism”. We can help them with premises, theological training resources for pastors and laity, and financial support for community care. And they can help us too – to rediscover the sheer joy of life in the power of the gospel, and to know the Church can be strong amid the adversities of deprivation and discrimination.¹⁰²

The continued perception of paternalism, however, was to prove a difficult aspect of the dialogue to negotiate.

The purpose of the Joint Working Party was to provide models for partnership. Discussions focussed on three specific areas, each resulting in a short booklet. *Coming together in Christ* (1978) made practical suggestions on grassroots ecumenism based on partnership, with various strategies for ‘bridge-building’ between leaders and congregations. *Building together in Christ* (1980) discussed the thorny issue of church buildings. This was a point of anger

⁹⁷ Gerloff, ‘Black immigration’, 4.

⁹⁸ Dartmouth House meeting, 4.

⁹⁹ Dartmouth House meeting, 10.

¹⁰⁰ Dartmouth House meeting, 12.

¹⁰¹ Cooper, “Partnership”.

¹⁰² Brian Cooper, ‘Britain’s Unknown Christians’, *Yes*, July-September 1977, 20.

amongst black leaders at Dartmouth House, where a white representative also had reported a denomination choosing to sell a building to a bingo hall rather than a BMC.¹⁰³ The pamphlet aimed to provide balanced advice on the hiring, sharing and selling of church buildings. It challenged the existing dynamic of relationships, arguing ‘To speak of “landlord and tenant” and “a market rent” is to fail to see each other as the Body of Christ.’¹⁰⁴ Finally, *Learning in Partnership* (1980) elucidated some of the rationale for cross-cultural theological education and drew attention to the work of the Centre for Black and White Christian Partnership, at Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham. The Joint Working Group discussions had been instrumental in the development of this project, which included the setting up of a Certificate in Theology course based on intercultural education.¹⁰⁵ The Centre was a concrete outcome of the dialogue. It would seek to provide ‘the opportunity, which major British denominations so badly need, to communicate on a basis of mutual partnership, and to listen, without being patronising, to the Christian voice speaking through another culture, albeit one that is related to ours by centuries of political and economic and religious involvement’.¹⁰⁶

Some of those involved in the dialogue from 1976 desired that an outcome might be black-led churches joining the BCC. However, various underlying difficulties and tensions complicated this potential ecumenical mechanism. Gerloff’s paper for Dartmouth House asserted that migrant churches applying to join such organisations should not ‘be confronted with statistical and technical requirements which could be racist in their very nature’.¹⁰⁷ Apparently when David Douglas had first raised the issue of joining the BCC, he was informed it was necessary for any church to have a membership of five thousand (a demand which led one West African Joint Working Party member to comment ‘if Jesus had been bothered by numbers he would have come at Rome, not Nazareth.’)¹⁰⁸ A further complication was the question of intra-black church unity. The Luton conference was notable for indicating the potential for that significant differences of culture, belief and practice might be spanned between African-Caribbean and African churches, and that so-called Caribbean “island chauvinism” could be overcome. Winston James argues regarding the latter that the National Health Service, London Transport and British racism had a role in mitigating such prejudices; however perhaps religion, too,

¹⁰³ Dartmouth House meeting, 13.

¹⁰⁴ *Building Together in Christ* (London, 1980), 5.

¹⁰⁵ By 1978/9 23 students were enrolled. CERC, BCC, DEA, 9/2/5/1, Minutes of the JWP, 30 June 1979.

¹⁰⁶ Dumper, ‘The churches’, 5.

¹⁰⁷ Gerloff, ‘Black immigration’, 12-13.

¹⁰⁸ CERC, BCC, DEA, 9/2/5/1, Minutes of the JWP, 10 February 1979.

could prove a unifying force?¹⁰⁹ However, despite the promise shown at Luton, such an extent of intra-black Christian unity was not to be achieved again in the context of the dialogue.

A further factor limiting the ecumenical potential of the BCC was the range of attitudes amongst black-led churches towards the organisation. The IMCGB, a body committed to both black self-reliance and inter-cultural ecumenism, was seen as a 'threshold organisation' for smaller churches to join the BCC. It became an associate member in 1979.¹¹⁰ Then, in 1979, the Council of African and Afro-Caribbean Churches was founded by Olu Abiola of Church of the Lord (Aladura). This largely represented African initiated churches and associated with the BCC in 1982.¹¹¹ However, in 1977 another group, the Afro-West Indian United Council of Churches (AWUCOC) was established. This very largely represented Trinitarian African-Caribbean groups, though there was an openness to African initiated churches joining.¹¹² Key figures were the Revd. Oliver Lyseight, who had been National Overseer of the NTCG, Ben Cunningham of the same denomination, and the Revd. Desmond Pemberton of the Pilgrim Wesleyan Holiness Church. The AWUCOC expressed a distinctive type of collective black Christian consciousness. The organisation had come into being 'because of the (Fulness-of-time) readiness of our churches to make their "united" Contribution to the struggle for moral/social deservedness of our people'.¹¹³ It deemed it necessary for black churches to respond to secularising and racist forces; 'the common threat to the witness they are giving in this country' from challenges such as racial prejudice, the media and concerns that religious education might be removed from the school curriculum.¹¹⁴ The AWUCOC emerged parallel to the Joint Working Party, which, along with the Centre for Black and White Christian Partnership, risked being seen as 'whites doing something for blacks'.¹¹⁵ The AWUCOC was perceived by some as representing an alternative approach. The liberal theological persuasion of the BCC, furthermore, jarred with the evangelical perspective of some who came to be involved in AWUCOC; after all, the World Council of Churches was still seen by many pentecostal and holiness groups, black and white, as the Beast of Revelation. More widely, interaction with white liberals, whatever the positive aspects, could also highlight very

¹⁰⁹ James 'Migration', 240.

¹¹⁰ Gerloff, *A Plea*, vol 2., 971. Shiloh United Church of Christ Apostolic became an associate member in 1980.

¹¹¹ Gerloff, *A Plea*, vol., 1 247.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 247;

¹¹³ CERC, BCC, DEA, 9/2/3/1, Ben Cunningham to various, n.d.

¹¹⁴ Ben Cunningham, 'Power sharing', *Christian Action* (Summer 1978), 4-7, quote at 7.

¹¹⁵ CERC, BCC, DEA, 9/2/5/1, Minutes of the JWP, 16-17 February 1978.

different theological points of reference.¹¹⁶ One Christian magazine suggested that while the AWUCOC would have a unifying effect on the black-led churches, 'its formation indicates that just as the members of these churches have not been able to settle in existing British churches, so the black-led churches have not found a home within the British Council of Churches.'¹¹⁷

A controversy erupted in 1978 on the occasion of the discussion at the Methodist Conference of the Methodist Church Overseas Division's annual report. This included the claim: 'Because the Black Churches came into being in reaction against White rejection, we have no right to be self-righteous; but we may conclude, more in sadness than anger, that at the very least such ghetto congregations are guilty of hoarding talents which ought to be diffused throughout the wider Christian community; at worst, they are denying the catholicity of the Church.' The phrase 'ghetto congregations' (based, as we have seen, on a long-standing viewpoint amongst many white liberal Christians), was singled out for particular criticism, including by representatives of the Zebra project.¹¹⁸ A comment piece in *Westindian World* made the accusation of 'double standards and hypocrisy', arguing 'white established churches are responsible for the formation of black churches. As in all other stratas of society black people were cold shouldered by the very same people who are now pointing the accusing finger.'¹¹⁹ Ben Cunningham, secretary of the AWUCUC, wrote in the *Guardian* that the Methodist 'attack':

reveals what black Christians had always suspected, that they still believe in the projection of a Jesus Christ who wears a pinstriped suit, a bowler hat and swings a tightly rolled umbrella, and that any group of Christians who refuses to share this perception (such as any churches with predominantly black members) are to be belittled as "ghetto congregations", with a "ghetto mentality".¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Interview with the Revd Phyllis Thompson.

¹¹⁷ 'Black churches come together', *Third Way*, 3 Nov 1977, 11.

¹¹⁸ 'Not an attack – a dispassionate analysis of where we are at', *Methodist Recorder*, 29 June 1978, 12-13. Some Methodists defended the report, arguing that it should not be construed as an attack on the black-led churches, and that it should be seen in the context, for example, of concern about separate development in South Africa. An amendment to refer the controversial paragraphs back to the Overseas Division was rejected by 256-242; though the word 'ghetto' was dropped from the report. On Zebra response, see 'Methodist Church slammed', *Westindian World* 30 June-6 July.

¹¹⁹ 'The Black Church', *Westindian World*, 16 June 1978, 2. See also letter (discussed below) from Ben Cunningham, 'Methodist Church', in *Westindian World*, 11 August-17 August 1978, 6.

¹²⁰ Ben Cunningham, 'Why Methodism lost its black sheep', letters to the editor, *Guardian*, 16 June 1978, 12.

The AWUCUC and the NTCG, the largest African-Caribbean denomination, appear to have had little active involvement with the Joint Working Party during its short existence. This did not necessarily mean opposition to the BCC discussions – Jeremiah McIntyre, after all, brought greetings to the ‘Unity in Love’ celebration. Nevertheless, theological, socio-political and cultural complexities underlay the BCC dialogue.

Conclusion: Coming together in Christ

During his sermon at St. Paul’s Cathedral in 1979, Harry Morton, General Secretary of the BCC, said ‘If we do not face the depths of what divides us, the unity we have celebrated tonight is a sham.’¹²¹ This raises the question of what exactly was the significance of the dialogue which had been celebrated by the singing and formalities at ‘Unity in Love.’ When contrasted with black-white Christian relations at the beginning of the decade, the ecumenism and model of partnership discussed in this article was, though modest in its immediate impact, a notable development in British religious life. The co-chair of the Joint Working Party recalled:

Our demeanour towards them [black leaders on the Joint Working Party], which we were learning to exhibit, was that these people are genuine Christians. It sounds very paternalistic. But after all we start from this very paternalistic attitude. People of my generation were brought up when the British Empire was the British Empire. And as a boy I can remember us all having this attitude...And so we were teaching ourselves not just to act but for it to come from us truly that we regarded the black-led churches as totally genuine and equal partners in the gospel. And I can remember teaching myself to be like that.¹²²

A wider context for the expression of Christian partnership was the beginnings of a social and political shift in race relations away from assimilationism, and more paternalistic forms of integrationism, towards multiculturalism, although white Christian concern about ‘ghettoization’ remained part of the wider debate.¹²³ ‘The affirmation of one’s own traditions and outlook is an appropriate stop on the way to sharing and cooperation with people of another culture, not a hindrance. The common culture in Christ for which we are all striving can only

¹²¹ *Church Times*, 2 November 1979.

¹²² Interview with the Rt. Revd. Hewlett Thompson.

¹²³ Wilkinson, discussing *The New Black Presence* and the Centre for Black and White Christian Partnership, has suggested a move away from a ‘colonial integration’ model in Christian relation in this period: *Church in Black and White*, 145.

be developed through carefully multi-cultural arrangements', black and white members of the Joint Working Party affirmed in 1980.¹²⁴ Ecumenical multiculturalism reflected a wider development in British race relations; but was intended itself to promote multiculturalism on the ground. White participants, importantly, were aware that black church leaders would offer vital channels of communication with the wider black community; black leaders, at the same time, were increasingly assertive of the role and contribution of their churches.¹²⁵

With partnership also came a transformation of language from black 'sect' to black-led church (or perhaps African church or African-Caribbean church). This linguistic development gathered currency in the secular and religious media reports of the dialogue.¹²⁶ Some white Christians began to see the BMCs as a force for re-sacralisation in Britain. As the discussion of Norwyn Denny suggests, white liberals might previously have seen black Christianity (not the BMCs specifically) as a potential source of Christian resurgence, if only the British denominations and their local congregations could somehow tap into this. By the end of the 1970s, however, some were seeing the BMCs themselves as sources of potential Christian growth. As the radical theologian Trevor Beeson wrote in the *Guardian* in 1979, 'in these African and West Indian churches lies the best hope of re-Christianising the British nation and in helping the weary churches of these islands to re-discover the true character of Christian faith and worship.'¹²⁷ This was the emergence of a anti-secularisation narrative, based on the ethnic transformation of British Christianity, that would later become influential. BMC leaders, too, were increasingly vocal concerning the possibilities of resurgence. 'Pentecostalism has the power to renew', asserted David Douglas at Dartmouth House.¹²⁸ The formation of the AWUCUC, parallel to the Joint Working Party, was in part an attempt to reassert Christian values in the face of secularising trends and racism.

The early momentum for ecumenical dialogue came from below, and the grassroots experiences of the likes of David Douglas in Watford and participants in the Zebra project. It was, furthermore, ecumenism in a relational mode, with a trajectory towards greater Christian cooperation rather than formal unity. There were challenges. The Joint Working Party deepened relationships between participants but acknowledged difficulties in gaining traction

¹²⁴ CERC, BCC, DEA, 9/2/3/6, Open forum: report and recommendations, St Matthew's Meeting Place, Brixton, 11 October 1980.

¹²⁵ Gerloff, 'Partnership', 16-17.

¹²⁶ See for example, Brian Cooper, 'Britain's unknown Christians', *Yes*, July-September 1977, 20; Baden Hickman, 'And on the third Sunday he formed a church', *Guardian*, 21 Jul 1977, 2.

¹²⁷ Trevor Beeson, 'Face to faith', *Guardian*, 20 October 1979, 8.

¹²⁸ Dartmouth House meeting, 5.

more widely. At one of its final meetings, a West African leader concluded the group had ‘started a tree growing whose first fruits we could not yet see.’ Gerloff spoke of a ‘task had hardly yet begun’ and the need for ‘yet more planting and watering’. The lines of communication with some of the Trinitarian African-Caribbean churches, they recognised, needed much improvement. The role of the BCC could be stumbling block for some.¹²⁹ Significantly, a West Indian Evangelical Alliance - linked with long-standing British pan-evangelical organisation of the same name - was established in 1984, and here theological commonalities offered a promising basis for ecumenism.¹³⁰ The Joint Working Party was replaced in 1980 by the Conference for Christian Partnership, which continued dialogue and interaction in the next decade. A 1987 report by the University of Leeds Community Religions Project described the achievements of the Conference for Christian Partnership as modest, but noted engagement with issues such as policing, media attitudes and youth issues. The Centre for Black and White Christian Partnership was innovative, but denominational support had been ‘slow’.¹³¹ The BCC, once it became ‘Churches Together’, maintained active commitment in this area through the Black Christian Concerns Group (1997) and then in the Minority Ethnic Christian Affairs secretariat (MECA, 2003). In an initial strategy document, the MECA described how many minority ethnic Christians have had an ‘uneasy relationship with ecumenical instruments’, because the BCC was often regarded by pentecostal/holiness churches as a ‘liberal version of biblical Christianity’ and some larger black majority denominations did not feel it necessary to be part of a ‘mainstream’ body in order to effect change.¹³² Nevertheless, the engagement which began at Dartmouth House in 1976 marked the beginnings of a shift towards an inclusive understanding of British Christianity, and an ecumenism based on a model of Christian partnership.

11,282 words, including footnotes, title, abstract and keywords.

¹²⁹ CERC, BCC, DEA, 9/2/5/1, Minutes of the JWP, 23 February 1980.

¹³⁰ The WIEA became the largest and most influential umbrella body of BMCs. In 1989 it became the Afro-Caribbean Evangelical Alliance and in 1991 the African and Caribbean Evangelical Alliance, in order to represent the emerging African neo-pentecostal evangelical churches.

¹³¹ Vanessa Howard, *A report on Afro-Caribbean Christianity in Britain*, Community Religious Project Research Paper, 4 (Leeds, 1987) 19, 39.

¹³² Minority Christian Ethnic Affairs, November 2003, 4-5.
www.cte.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?id=12445 accessed 6 July 2018.