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**THE CHRISTIAN BRETHREN
MOVEMENT AND ITS
CONTRIBUTION TO THE WEST
INDIAN LANDSCAPE**

Vincent Ross

MA (cand.)

THE BEGINNING

The word is that in the 1820s, two groups of men began meeting in their homes simply to ‘break bread’, and do Bible study. One group met in Dublin, while the other met in Plymouth, unconnected to each other. Eventually they got to know about each other and discovered that they were of the same persuasion; thus the start of the Brethren Movement.

They had become disillusioned with the established church because they believed that the church had lost focus and had become

‘worldly’, due in part to its close connection with the State. The aim of these brethren was to provide a fellowship in which all true believers could worship together, gathered around the Lord’s Table, and study the Scriptures without being divided by differing denominational allegiances.

Among the early leaders were J.N. Darby (1800-82); Benjamin Willis Newton (1807-99); George Muller (1805-98); Anthony Norris Groves (1795-1853).

Darby was a member of the clergy when he first joined the Brethren in 1827. He eventually left the Established church of Ireland to work with the brethren to strengthen the movement. He was a bible scholar (there are Darby translations of the Bible in French, English, and German), bible teacher and evangelist. The brethren was opened to anyone who expressed faith in Jesus Christ, but in later years it was thought that false doctrines were creeping into the movement and so Darby thought that some amount of exclusivity was needed. This led to disagreement among the brethren, causing a split in the movement in 1848. On the one hand there were those who were restrictive about who to receive into the fellowship and which church groups to associate with and are referred to as Exclusive or Closed Brethren; these lean mostly to Darby’s influence. On the other hand there are those who are, to varying degrees, Open. It is to this group that the writer of this paper belongs, now identified as the Christian Brethren Assemblies Jamaica (CBAJ).

JN Darby travelled all over the world spreading the movement and strengthening the small groups. In 1850 Darby along with G.V. Wigram, another outstanding man of the movement, are said to have visited, preached and set up the first Brethren assemblies in Jamaica. It is unclear how many brethren assemblies existed by 1900 but all seem to have been Exclusive.

THE Early DAYS IN JAMAICA

The first Christian Brethren Assembly was established in Jamaica in the early 20th Century. The exact date is unknown, as these believers are not noted for keeping records. They met at Hanover Street, Slipe Road, West Race Course and finally 188 Orange Street, the present home, known as Assembly Hall.

It started as Exclusive/Closed brethren, but as the saints committed themselves to the study of the word (Sola scriptura) they became more and more convinced that exclusivity was not how the church should go. Brothers Eustace Mais, Bryan Caws, Alexander Daniels, James Green, Herman Thorn, along with their wives, led the walk out, being joined later by brothers Herbert Harris, George Foster, Vincent Foster, and others, this according to Leo Smith, former elder, now deceased. All told, about fifty (50) of them left and started to meet at 81A Slipe Road, about half mile above where they presently meet. As can be imagined, they were struggling, but in 1923, Leonard and Irene Bewick, Missionaries from the USA came and began serving

among these brethren. The Bewicks also, by the grace of GOD established a Back to The Bible office in 1958.

The effort was strengthened with the coming of two more Missionaries, William and Grace Gibson from Canada, in 1925, who were also primarily responsible, by GOD's grace, for the founding and establishing of Maranatha Gospel Hall, in 1929.

In 1928, another missionary, George Henry Hale, wife Edith and three sons, from New Zealand, were instrumental in starting the Elim Assembly in the Shortwood Road, Kingston 8 area, after serving in Guyana for three years. He served at Elim until 1949.

The man who impacted the movement the most in Jamaica is identified as Harold Wildish, a Missionary from England, along with his wife Marion. Under his ministry through tent crusades, in crusades, and other gospel meetings across the island, thousands came to know the LORD JESUS as their own personal Saviour. The involvement of the foreign missionaries cannot be overlooked as men and their wives came to our shores for the purpose of preaching the gospel and planting churches.

THE WORK PROGRESSES

Through crusades and Street meetings, Assemblies were raised up in the Corporate Area, gradually spreading out into the rural areas. The present number of Assemblies stands in the mid eighties.

The mantra for the Brethren Movement was gospel presentation, and so the first set of these meeting places were known as Gospel Halls, not to be confused with the Associated Gospel Assemblies. In more recent times some identify themselves as Fellowship, Gospel Chapel, and Chapel; incidentally, the gospel focus is not as strong as it used to be.

EDUCATION

The Brethren started the Midland Bible Institute in about 1971, serving to train believers, particularly from among the brethren, in Bible education and missionary work. This work, spearheaded by Emile Turner and Frank Fenton was late in coming to fruition because of the view of the leading brethren of the day that Christian education is the responsibility of the church and so there was no need for saints to go to ‘Bible school’, and therefore no need to establish any such institution.

Some of the students are Jamaicans while a few are from the Caribbean and other foreign countries. Notable graduates are Dr Monica Burgher, Dr. Adrian Thomas, international church planter, Bro Gordon Vance Soutar, to name a few.

These men as well as other graduates like Donahue Collash, Colin Gray, Hugh Richards, Monica Burgher, Maureen (Lue) Bailey et al., have been serving in local and foreign churches, foreign missions, as

well as para-church organisations. Some of them have been and are lecturers in Seminaries, both local and foreign.¹

SCHOOL ANYONE?

The brethren have been very involved in education and so have established and maintained a number of Basic and Preparatory/Primary schools in both Corporate and Rural areas. Many outstanding professionals, both at home and abroad, started their educational journey in some of these brethren operated schools. There are names that come readily to mind but who will not be mentioned for there are many others, equally successful, whose names are not readily remembered, and so the paper would not show a true reflection of the schools' ministry and achievements.

SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT

The Brethren started a football team in about 1976 that goes by the name, Christian Ambassadors Footballers United (CAFU). The purpose of the team, which has become inter-denominational, is to use

¹ In 1995 Rev. Anthlone Wade [a Jamaican graduate of MBI] . . . became [Carver] College's fourth President. An academician with a passion for the ministry of the church of Jesus Christ, Rev. Wade directed the college to keep pace with the advancing educational standards in the United States. He won approval from the Board of Trustees to chart the bold course towards initial accreditation with the Association of Biblical Higher Education (formerly the Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges). In 1997, the college was awarded applicant status with the ABHE. Under Dr. Wade's leadership the main campus underwent several major renovations including remodeling the administration building, the gym and opening a new campus bookstore. A five-unit apartment complex was purchased on Nelson Street and remodeled to become Ripley Hall, an 18 bed men's dormitory. In 1998 an athletic program was launched and the Carver Cougars men's basketball program began their first season playing in the National Christian College Athletic Association (NCCAA).
<http://www.carver.edu/contents/Home/CarverHistory.html>. accessed 18.6.21.

the sport as a channel through which the gospel can be shared with men who would normally not be ‘going to church’, to hear the word. Numbered among former players are former National coaches Carl Brown and Rene Simoes. The driver of this ministry is Bro. Frederick D. Hemmings, a deacon at Assembly Hall.²

MISSION FIELD

The Brethren have been involved in Missionary work as well, commending some of their members to serve as missionaries in local and foreign fields. Brother Randall Taylor of Maranatha, in 1941 became the first Jamaican among the Open Brethren to become a commended full time worker. He and his wife Eldora worked in the Balaclava region from the 1940s for years, and through their ministry, the Emmaus Gospel Hall was established.

The first on foreign soil as a missionary was Roy Campbell of Maranatha, going to British Honduras, now Belize, in 1946. He was later joined by Richard Saeurlander, also of Maranatha. There he was able to plant four Brethren churches, now being overseen by another Jamaican ‘brethren’ missionary, Gordon ‘Dickie’ Soutar from the Harbour View Chapel. Stanford and May Kelly of Maranatha went to Haiti in 1940, apparently not as ‘commended’ workers.

Not to be outdone, several sisters have gone on the foreign mission field; Gloria Amritt (Colombia), Gloria Edwards, Celile Carey, Vera Jones (all to Belize), Georgia Rankine, Jean Wong (Haiti), Elaine

² For more on CAFU, see *Acts: A Contextual Commentary* (Kingston: EMI, 2020), APPENDIX 2..

Huie, twin sisters Daphne and Lilla (all to Africa), Audrey Haynes (Guadeloupe) and Linda Lowe (Hong Kong). These sisters, for the most part were able to use their professional training (nurses, teachers mainly) while they shared the gospel. Of course there were others who served and are serving on local soil, too numerous to mention.

The latest of the Missionaries to venture unto the foreign field is Sis Donna-Ree Maitland, of Ensom City Gospel Chapel, serving in nearby, sometimes volatile, Haiti, since 2017. She admits that it is not easy going but is convinced that this is where the Lord wants her to be.

There were other brothers who, despite not being commended to the work but were burdened for Americans, left Jamaica and got involved in ministry, especially among the blacks. Numbered among them are: Arthur Fitz-Ritson, Keith Bogle, Carl South, Harry and Len Chang, Audley McLean, Aubrey McGann, to name a few, some of whom have been called home to be with the Lord.

Among the local 'non-commended' workers were Hugh Clacken, reported to have planted ten (10) assemblies by age 24, Clinton Webb, Berley Adair, to name a few. These were men who travelled all across the island preaching the gospel, with a few foreign excursions, to do the same. Clinton Webb led successful team ministry crusades to Bahamas, St, Kitts and Nevis, Dominica, Guyana, Belize and Trinidad. He also spoke in several cities in the USA, Canada and England.

With the Chinese presence being very prominent in the island, Bro. Eli Ho of Maranatha was one of the teachers of English to this group. He used the opportunity to share the gospel with them and many of the converts became members of the Maranatha Assembly. It was from among these that the nucleus of Swallowfield chapel came.

CAMP MINISTRY

Summer Camps, Week-end Camps, Easter Camps and Ministry retreats have factored greatly in the annual agenda of the Assemblies.

Outside of the camps of individual Assemblies, there was the Teen Time Camp which for years was the 'must go to' camp for teens and young adults in the brethren. For years the Camp Director was the late Dave Ho of the Maranatha Assembly and Swallowfield Chapel, ably assisted by the late Ray Wynter of Carmel, Errol Beecher and the late Pat (Eaves) McKenzie. On retirement from camp, the baton was passed on to John Keane of Bethany who ran well with it until it phased out.

A lot of talents were unearthed at these camps, and of special note, the Teen Time Quartet, which later, teaming up with some sisters, became known as the Sunshine Singers. For years this was the gospel group of choice, their music ministry extending beyond the shores of Jamaica.

With more and more Assemblies deciding to hold their own camps, it was evident that the Teen Time Camp ministry had done its days. A few years later, the Corporate Area youths decided that they needed a corporate area brethren camp and so Assemblies which were doing Summer Camps gave way to Corporate Area Assemblies Summer (CAAS) Camps which, after a few years, gave way to a camp for the region, South East Youth Arm (SEYA) Camp.

MEDIA

Through the vision of Clinton Webb, Kenn Fullerton, and Billy Hall, a number of magazines and other literature were produced, but each lasted only for a short while. Out of all this, Kenn Fullerton managed to influence the brethren to start the Christian Publications book store, which was more than a book store; producing plaques, greeting cards, etc.

The media ministry entered Radio-land in early 1950s, when Arthur Hart got permission from Radio Jamaica, to produce the “The Master’s Time” Programme aired on Wednesday nights. RJR was the only broadcast station in Jamaica at that time. This programme ran for years.

Roy Campbell, on his return from his tour of duty in Belize, launched Food For Thought, on behalf of the Assemblies. Billy Hall, a journalist by profession, was instrumental in getting on radio, firstly

the programme, 'Stop and Think', which ran for about a year, and then 'Look at Life', which continues to be aired on Sunday mornings at 7:05, after the 7 o'clock news. It has been rated by independent secular surveys as the best listened to religious programme in Jamaica.

THE BIG PICTURE

The Caribbean Brethren Assemblies Conference (CBAC) has been raised up in recent times with stated goal as shown in the quotation from their official page below,

A Caribbean Brethren Assemblies Conference (CBAC) was held in St Kitts from July 13th to 17th, 2014, with participants from 12 Caribbean territories (including Bermuda and Guyana) and from the USA, UK³ and India. At a closing session, the participants agreed that similar CBAC's should be held, one in 2017 and, thereafter, at four-yearly intervals.`

The Caribbean Brethren Assemblies Conference Committee (CBACC) *exists to serve and strengthen the Brethren movement in the Caribbean**, thereby enabling it to play its part in carrying out the mission given to the church by the Lord Jesus Christ more effectively.

The clause in italics is crucial because the Movement needs to put into effect the well known fact that there is strength in numbers and also that unity is strength. The strengthening and numerical growth of the Movement is directly related to the strengthening of the Brethren 'corpus' in the region. Herein is the key to the Brethren Movement taking its rightful place among the denominations of the

³ The most famous Brethren scholar is undoubtedly the late F.F. Bruce, whose biography is now available, and reviewed in the following: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/review/f-f-bruce-a-life/>:

**world and in particular and more importantly, spreading the gospel,
“...to the uttermost part of the earth”.**

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Acknowledgements

I must acknowledge the various sources which contributed to making this paper a reality.

Firstly, the magazine ‘Assembly Affairs’ (January 1989) from which much of the material was taken, played an integral role in my search for information. In mentioning this magazine, I must thank Dr Billy Hall, not only for putting it together but also for his articles on the beginning of the ‘Brethren movement’ and its local history 1920-1988.

Thanks to Dr. Barrington Houston for his assistance in making his research, in particular as it relates to Maranatha Assembly, available to me.

Thanks to Aulous Madden for his input concerning the ministry of Eli Ho among the Chinese folks which led to the establishing of the Swallowfield Chapel.

Thanks to Berley Adair (Jnr.) for making available the history of Assembly Hall, the first Open Brethren Assembly.

The assistance of the above is very greatly appreciated for had it not been for these contributions, this paper would not be a reality and if it was a reality it would be largely fictitious.