

Baptist World Alliance Heritage and Identity Commission July 2001 Charlottetown PEI

**THE GUYANA CONNECTION
Reflections on Baptists in Guyana**

by Lionel Moriah

Text: Revelation 11:15-17- "And the seventh angel sounded; and there arose loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever.'" And the twenty-four elders, who sit on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshipped God, saying, 'We give Thee thanks, O Lord God, the Almighty, who art and who was, because Thou hast taken Thy great power and hast begun to reign.'

Introduction

Sir /Madam Chairperson, brothers and sisters in Christ, colleagues and friends, thank you for the opportunity of participating in this important occasion.

My disclaimer is; should I bore or befuddle you, blame it on Drs. Bob Wilson and Chuck Webber for convincing me that my input at this conference would be pertinent to the process. I say that because experience of Baptist work in Guyana in the last 23 years has been informed only by periodic visits since theological studies brought us to Canada and ministerial duties kept us here in what we believe to be God's purposes for us.

Personal Testimony:

My first contact with Baptists occurred while I was a young private-school teacher in Berbice county where I resided. Having recently accepted Jesus as my personal Lord and Saviour, I was elated to discover that my colleague on staff was "a Baptist pastor cleverly disguised as a school teacher", and whose tent-making mission was to pioneer Baptist ministry in that area. I was eventually baptized by him and became an active member of the "Seafield Baptist Mission" in 1969. In pursuit of a prospective career in medicine I moved to Linden a bauxite mining town in Demerara, seeking more lucrative employment in preparation for university. Subsequently, I became a member of the Wismar Baptist Church where I met and married my wife Jemell. Over time I became a deacon and eventually interim pastor after the departure of our Pastor to pioneer work elsewhere. The year 1973 March was significant for our family as the time I surrendered to what I believed to be the call of God to pursue a vocation in pastoral ministry.

As I became more acquainted with the work of the denomination, it was discovered that the present Baptist work in Guyana received its impetus from the Billy Graham Crusade of the Americas which occurred in the early sixties. Thus earliest ministry of the Guyana Baptist Mission was pioneered by Southern Baptist Convention under the dedicated leadership of such missionary families as Otis and Martha Brady, Charles and Mary Love, Marsha Herin, Jacobs, and Jean Hokum, first single female missionary to Guyana. Her task was to organize mission groups among the women. However, it must be noted that the initial Baptist pioneers in this tropical country dated back to 1861 when the National Baptist Convention of the USA Inc. arrived on these shores.(Thiessen, 393; BWA statistics, 2000)

MINISTRIES

Several types of ministries were coordinated by the Guyana Baptist Mission in its effort to serve a population of over 3/4 million spread across three counties spanning 86,000 square miles of clay, sand, hilly and mountainous

terrain with lots of water ways hence the name Guyana - land of many waters. Evangelism and Church planting was the first priority of the Mission as it sought to be true to the Great Commission. Soon churches and mission points were being established in all three counties among the six racial groups that populated this former British colony on the North Eastern coast of South America. Such ministry was greatly facilitated by the absence of language barrier since English was the main language. Similarly, there would have been very little of a cultural difference to contend with by the Missionaries. Camping served as both a means of reaching out to the youth as well as an opportunity for couples and leadership retreats at Goshen on the Essequibo River.

Some social ministries were also initiated through the work of dental and medical staff who came and volunteered their time in providing care in needy locales. Usually these health visits were twinned with evangelistic events spanning several days to a week.

Theological education and training began in the early seventies as a means of providing lay and pastoral training. The sessions were held on a fortnightly basis to groups of students who travelled into the capital city from outlying points. Their travel, accommodation, meals and books were subsidized by the Mission. Several missionaries taught the courses on homiletics and theology. Some students were later sponsored to continue further studies in the United States. When the Theological College opened in Barbados others were directed there in 1976-77.

Probably it was the national mood of the times that motivated this move of theological training for the indigenous believers. Under the current government the country was moved to the status of a Republic and that was followed by a spate of nationalization ventures affecting all foreign companies, interests and concerns. The basic intent of this was to allow local leadership to assume responsibility to replace expatriates. Consequently, even missionaries were forced to hand over their tasks and responsibilities to local leadership. Unfortunately, due to being ill equipped at the time, while much decision making lay in the hands of missionaries, the work suffered negatively since new missionaries were discouraged from entering the country while expired visas of those on furlough were not renewed.

In response to these opportune times, the Guyana Baptist Cooperative Convention was organized in May, 1973 with the view of having local leadership spearhead the work in partnership with the remaining representatives of Guyana Baptist Mission Board. During this time there existed approximately seventeen churches and mission points that now comprised the convention. The first area minister appointed to oversee ministry in one given area - Berbice region - was Rev. Desmond Stephens, my former pastor and colleague. Work in the hinterland areas was particularly challenging since they were only accessible by motor boats or launches. According to the latest BWA statistics (2000), there are currently thirty three churches and eighteen hundred and twenty three members.

If you are thinking that the growth seems small compared to the history, then you are echoing my convictions. I believe this minimal growth reflects the recovery still in place from the shift of missionary leadership to indigenous directives for ministry. That the work is still adversely affected for lack of trained effective local leadership, is evidenced in a recent "Macedonian Call" appealing for training and resources for local pastors and lay leaders. This appeal came as I was preparing this address.

One very admirable feature of GBM administration policies in relation to developing churches, is the system by a financial agreement is made to assist the newly organized church in paying its pastor. Each year the mission board gave a certain percentage less which the local congregation was then challenged to reach until it assumes full responsibility for all its ministry including property ownership. Such was the church of which I was a member and servant prior to coming to Canada. Moreover, since that time a number of other Baptist groups have gone into Guyana and have developed various types of ministries.

CANADA LINK

I was asked to share on the Canadian link to Baptist work in Guyana. Some call it coincidence I call it providential. I refer to the delightful awareness of the impending visit of a Canadian Baptist Team to Guyana in the early nineties. In fact not only were they going to Guyana but they would be at the very church I pastored prior to coming to Canada, as well as the very Mission my wife and I served as pioneer leaders. Wismar Baptist Church, the Mother church was established in 1967 by Rev. Desmond Stephens. In the course of time two missions were pioneered Blue Berry Hill Baptist Mission and Mackenzie Baptist Mission. The latter, which concerns the link, was established in June of 1994 with my wife Jemell and me inducted as its pioneer leaders. Ministries conducted included worship, Sunday School and a kindergarten school. The growth of this mission was challenging and gradual until our departure for Canada in 1978-79 respectively. By that time some of the younger members were delegated to serve the mission since I had assumed pastor of the Mother church in 1975 -78.

I first learned about the Canada/Guyana link through a friend and then sought an audience with Rev. David Phillips former General Secretary of Canadian Baptist Ministries. In the summer of 1992 we met at the annual convention assembly in Sackville New Brunswick. There I was informed that a team might be going to Guyana perhaps in the new year 1993. At that time I offered to be a resource person who might be useful in supplying useful data about the culture and other pertinent issues. However, nothing else was learnt about the Guyana Project until a subsequent issue of the "Infomission" featured an extensive article of a mission trip by a Canadian team. Through the cooperation of Mrs. Suzanne Taylor, I was able to glean some historical information about the Canada/Guyana link described as "Guyana Project".

1993

The relationship began in January 1993 when the Guyana Baptist Cooperative Convention invited the Canadian Baptist International Ministries (to explore a partnership in ministry). Subsequently, an exploratory visit was made by Rev. David K. Phillips, Latin American Representative for CBIM and Dr. Robert Taylor which resulted in the recommendation that CBIM send short term dental and health education teams.

1994

In May CBIM approved the proposal to work with the Guyana Baptist Convention for a period of 3-5 years on short term mission projects. In November Heather Steeves, National CBV coordinator, invited Suzanne Taylor to be project Manager responsible for recruitment, orientation, and debriefing as well as to lead the first team and fill the role of community health nurse. Mrs. Taylor accepted and agreed to a three year commitment

1995

In March the first dental/health team consisting of Mrs. Suzanne Taylor, Dr. Kevin Phillips, Lesley Ray and Dr. Jean Weir travelled to Guyana. There was evidently some partnering with the John Manga, Brazilian Baptist Missionary working with the BCCG and stationed in Linden.

1996

During a second visit by the dental/health education team of Suzanne Taylor, Dr. Kevin Phillips, Dr. Keith Pendergast, Heather Earnshaw, and Lesley Ray was joined by Muriel Bent, Latin American rep, who led discussions with the church and explored some possibilities for micro-enterprise projects. CBIM also received request for help with the deaf ministry. A proposal presented to CBV for assistance with the Mackenzie Mission Construction Project eventually resulted in the joint appointment of Doug and Donna Summerhayes (1997), by the Canadian Executive Services Overseas, with the responsibility of assisting with the Mission Construction Project and health education.

Mission History.

As mentioned earlier, the Mackenzie Baptist mission was birthed in 1974, with my wife and I as the first mission leaders. The original building was an old wooden apartment building that was modified into an electrical appliance/fixture store at the time of acquisition. After some extensive modifications we were able to add on an apartment to serve as pastor's residence. By 1988 the building had to be demolished due to disrepair and the mission was temporarily closed, with only the newer part that housed the pastor surviving. On 3rd September 1995, the mission was reopened in this remaining section of the building and the work grew steadily and significantly with 38 added by baptism between Jan'y '96 to March '99 to the founding group of 14 members who had transferred from the mother church. The majority of these are youth ranging from age 16 - 22 years. However, the burning desire to have a church on the east side of the Demerara River eventually led to the Project proposal mentioned above, and which saw materialization through the joint efforts of Doug Summerhayes, Canadian missionary; Dirk Van Klavern, a Civil engineer and citizen of Holland, now residing in Linden; the approval of the building plans by the Mayor and town council of Linden; and the Linmine Geological Department. Meanwhile a spiritual building was taking place as God added to His church those who were being saved, under the leadership of Pastor John Manga and later Pastor Trevor Vangenderen.

Perusal of the 2000 report by Suzanne Taylor also revealed that the mission exhibits mature stewardship in mobilising their own financial and human resources to meet ministry needs. Two cases in point are the fund-raising efforts to send the deaf ministry team to Trinidad, and the purchase of such items as tambourines, trays and videos. Hence ministry with Guyanese Baptists is a mutually beneficial experience of "stirring up one another to love and good works".

Coming of Age : Mackenzie Baptist Church

Needless to say my joy was boundless when I received the invitation to be guest speaker at the organization service for the Mackenzie Baptist Church on July 4, 1999 and facilitator for youth conference on July 5. The only regret - my wife couldn't accompany me. The feeling was like that of a father who was absent from the family for a long time only to come home one day to an invitation to his daughter's wedding with the task of giving her away. My congregation was very gracious and bore the cost of my journey gladly and generously. Indeed it was a dream realized, a wish come true, a prayer answered - grace bestowed upon an unworthy servant by a gracious God. I preached on the text Philippians 4:13 on the Sunday morning worship, shared my own testimony of faith in Canadian pilgrimage, and facilitated a workshop on Temptation on the Monday for about 50 youth. Times were also spent cleaning the building and visiting with the pastor during the week. Truly blessed I was in this opportunity to return and serve where I first experienced my call to ministry as well as received my first training to that end.

CONCLUSION

Although it must be admitted that much more research is needed in this matter of Baptist presence in Guyana which stretches beyond the Southern Baptist "fold", there are nonetheless some preliminary conclusions to be made from the available information covered in this article. First, all ministry entails partnership that can be enriching and mutually beneficial for the partners - sending and receiving (host) churches. Such an approach to ministry in Missions demands a revisiting of the "body" metaphor of the church in its global significance. It infers that all who sit at the table of any mission venture for discussions on policies and procedures be regarded as equals. Such an understanding would likely counteract or prevent feelings of superiority and inferiority while also preventing any hint of paternalism or condescension as an atmosphere of equality is established as the foundation for ministry together (II Cor. 8:13,14). Second, it is crucial that there be immediate equipping of indigenous leadership and lay volunteers for the work of ministry, where necessary, in preparation for all future eventualities often generated by political or social instability or upheaval. Moreover, this is the way God planned it anyhow (Eph.4). Third, we must be alert to God's marvellous work of grace that often speaks to us in our struggles with unity.

In the Guyana Connection, God is seen to use multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-racial and diverse sources and resources to revive the Mackenzie Mission and organize it into a church of which it is said "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it". Indeed God utilized the wealth of the nations -Brazil, Canada, Guyana, Holland, and the USA - to fulfill His grand design. In the process all nations, kindred, tongues and peoples are drawn into His eternal kingdom. Truly today, this moment, is a celebration of this divine design to bring him glory, honour and majesty through our individual but interdependent ministries. Surely, in His awesome presence all barriers fall and differences fade as we all with one voice glorify our God and king while laying our crowns at His feet.

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