

Norman's Sabbatical - May 1st - June 30th 2013

REPORT

BACKGROUND

I'd only had one full sabbatical before and that was in 1993, when I knew I was going to Walworth Methodist Church, where the majority of the membership was of African descent. I had never been to Africa and wanted to see that continent with my own eyes. It was in that year that I went to Ghana and to The Gambia, and it stood me in good stead for my subsequent ministry, during which I have visited many African countries and even lived in Africa for six years.

When I came to Clapham in 2010 I was delighted to find that there were many Caribbean members in the congregation, as well as African. It reminded me so much of when I first came to London, in 1983, and was the minister at a church where the majority of the membership were Caribbean. In 1986, I acquired my first ever passport and made my first trip out of Europe visiting Barbados, Montserrat and Antigua. That wasn't a sabbatical, but the congregation at Fernhead Road had persuaded me that I should visit their countries, and I willingly accepted their persuasion and made the journey. After that I realized the pastoral value of meeting family members of my congregation and seeing where people had lived as children, and experiencing the climate and the environment - all of which made conversation different and gave me a greater understanding of cultures and perceptions.

One regret was that I always had to say 'I've never been to Jamaica'.



Service at Clapham Methodist Church for Jamaica's 50th Independence Celebration



*Jamaica's 50th Anniversary at Clapham
- August 2012*

THIS TIME AROUND

With retirement fast approaching I had wondered whether I should have taken three months out of my circuit duties but I felt that not only would it be an opportunity to be able to make a visit to Jamaica, but also enable a period of reflection about my ministry to date and how I might address the prospect of 'sitting down' from the active work. In addition I thought it might be the chance to catch up on the changes brought about by an 'on line' administration of ministry and to improve my computer skills. And, of course, there is a compulsory element for ministers to take their sabbaticals, in order for us to benefit from this very generous gift from our church.

The congregation at Clapham were very supportive and a 'whip round' gave me a further £500 to add to the £700 sabbatical grant and to generously help with the financial implications - for which I was very grateful.

The local clergy of Churches Together in Clapham, had planned a visit to Rome, which was scheduled at the end of May, so, this too became a part of my sabbatical, as did a much intended visit to my son and his wife in Dubai.

Easter Sunday was on March 31st 2013, and after a rather hectic period of Lent and Holy Week services, of the setting up of the Clapham Night Time Hub, which had involved 3 a.m. bed times since December 2012 on Fridays and Saturdays each weekend, as well as all the other local, circuit and district commitments, I commenced the three month sabbatical on April 1st.

The first ten days

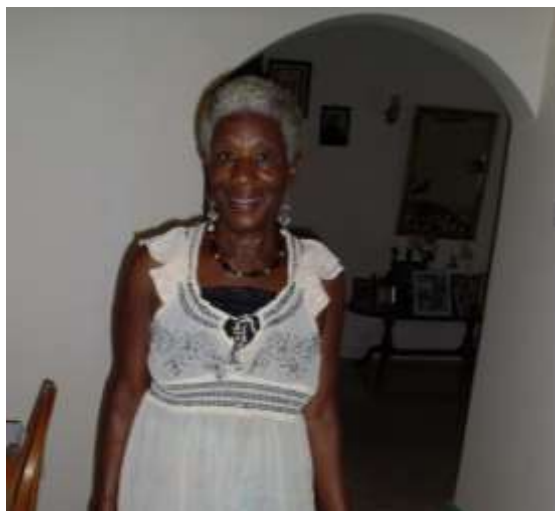
I had deliberately planned to have a week or so at home before travelling, thinking that this would allow me to make some more definite arrangements for my stay in Jamaica, give me time to do some household and garden jobs and perhaps visit family and friends in other areas of the UK.

In actual fact, although I managed to see a couple of friends and say farewell to my children, I had so much unfinished church business, which took up most of the time that very few of the other intentions were fulfilled. I did manage to complete my Will though - well, you never know what might happen.

JAMAICA

On April 10th, armed with a list of about 12 names to contact, the money that had been so kindly given to me, an air ticket, Saga insurance, passport and credit cards - I left Tremadoc Road at 9.30 a.m. to board the Virgin Atlantic flight to Montego Bay, which was due to leave Gatwick at 12.40 p.m.

Wednesday April 10th



Alida Ebanks at home



Vean ('V') Ebanks

I didn't have a detailed itinerary for my stay in Jamaica. I knew I was going to be staying with Alida and Vean (known as 'V') - a couple I had known from my Fernhead Road days and who had returned to JA in 1999. After that I was going to stay with Neville Lawrence in Manchester and with Marylyn Tapper in Kingston - but when and for how long I had no idea. It was Alida who had said that Montego Bay was nearer than Kingston Airport and V would pick me up. I had assumed that their home was near to Montego Bay.

The flight was good and the plane arrived at about 4.15 p.m. (Jamaica time, which was 5 hours behind BST) yet I wasn't let out of the airport until I had told the officials where I would be staying. I had no idea of the address, so I had to find out - by looking up their telephone directory entry. V and Alida's brother were there to meet me when I was eventually released and took me on a three and a half hour journey to Treasure Beach, St. Elizabeth.

Alida and V lived in a spacious house, with their eldest son Stephan. Their other two sons, Omar and Asher, had both returned to London for study and employment. The house was set in 8 acres of land on which they had four or five buildings and twenty goats. The buildings were there for bed and breakfast guests - with three of them containing guest rooms for up to 12 people, and the others, which were used for lounge and bar for their guests. There were no guests staying when I went, so I stayed in the house with the family and the outlying buildings remained locked up.

I went to bed at 9 p.m., having had no sleep, apart from a couple of hours on the plane, since getting up at 7 a.m. the day before.

Thursday April 11th - Monday April 15th

I stayed with Alida and V - went to Black River Town twice, spent a few hours at Treasure Beach, where I went swimming, I read two books and began arranging my itinerary, making contact with Neville and Marylyn. I realized that I would be staying with Neville around the time of the 20th anniversary of his son's murder.

I visited, with Alida, a couple of local residents. One was the home of a couple of returning residents whose London years were in Lewisham, another was after church, on the Sunday, at a house where the elderly wife had been very ill.

I went to church for morning worship on the Sunday - to the Assemblies of God. It was where Alida worshipped and on the Sunday when I was there, she was the Worship Leader. A lay member preached, as the Pastor was away at a Conference. She was very traditional and made an altar call, where about six people came forward for blessing.

Treasure Beach is a rural area, yet being near such a beautiful beach caters for a few tourists. When Alida first started her bed and breakfast the tourist trade wasn't developed, but now there is an area of a few hotels, one of which, Jack Sprat's, is becoming very popular. All of this development has hit the bed and breakfast trade, since Alida and V first started theirs.

I soon became aware that everyone knew everyone else and the Ebanks name was shared by many. The woman we went to see with all the church members was V's cousin, the bar on the beach, where I sat when I went swimming, Eggy's Bar, was owned by another of V's cousins. People soon got to know that I was staying at Alida's and V's place - which was called Ashanti, by the way - and they knew who I was as I wandered around the area.



Local Trader on Treasure Beach

The climate, the housing and the village ethos was very reminiscent of The Gambia and I felt very much at home. It was a good introduction to Jamaica for me, enabling me to become acclimatized and energising me for the task of achieving what I had set out to do.

As well as contacting the names on my list and to see the Methodist Church at work, I was determined to visit the NCH Methodist Children's Home, to visit Stephen Lawrence's grave, to visit the Maroon town and to visit Trench Town.

Monday April 15th

Neville and his friend (Mr. Banjo) came to pick me up at about 1 p.m. and they drove me to Neville's house at Mandeville in the parish of Manchester. It's an area where many returning residents go to live, with a climate that is much cooler than the Treasure Beach area where I had been staying. The housing in the part of town where I was staying is similar to new housing developments in the U.K., with named streets, made-up roads and the houses much closer together. It was a 2 bedroomed house - with each bedroom having a large en-suite bathroom.