

Wesleyan Holiness Church Eastern Jamaica

Before the end of the nineteenth century, an indigenous holiness church known as the Christian Catholic Church, was established in Jamaica. Through its ministry, a young Jamaican, Miss Ella Ruddock was converted. She later traveled to the United States of America and studied at Taylor University in Indiana. While there, she met with and was inspired by the work of an organization known as the Missionary Bands of the World—a former auxiliary of the Free Methodist Church.

Overwhelmed by a burden for the people in her homeland, she solicited the Band's leaders to extend their missionary work to Jamaica. Her expectation went unfulfilled as missionaries were not available.

Miss Ruddock returned to Jamaica in 1912 and began a ministry in Friendship, Westmoreland under the auspices of the Missionary Bands. She was joined in 1915 by an American, Miss Susie Schlatter. They pioneered a work which made Jamaica a prominent mission field of the Missionary Bands of the World. In 1949 the work was legally incorporated. By then several other missionaries had come to Jamaica to work; many Jamaicans were converted. The work continued to grow and by 1954, there were sixteen organized and three unorganized churches.

A major milestone was reached in 1958, when the Missionary Bands of the World merged its churches in Indiana and its mission fields in Central India and Jamaica with the Wesleyan Church of America. This marked the inception of the American extraction of the Wesleyan Movement in Jamaica. At the time of the merger, there were thirty-six pastors and workers, ten of whom were ordained. There were twenty-four churches with a total membership of 623. In addition, there were sixty-six Sunday schools with an average attendance of 2,000. By 1968, these figures were surpassed considerably. Through the decades of the fifties and sixties, the Church consolidated its efforts. By 1962, it was able to send missionaries (The Hewling family) abroad (Honduras).

The work of the Pilgrim Holiness Church in Jamaica was pioneered by its first missionary to the island, the Rev. Mr. J.R. Figueroa, and American trained Cuban who arrived in the island in December 1919. The church at the time bore the name The International Holiness Church.

His labors began in a small mission in Kingston and was augmented by a number of American missionaries who arrived in 1924 (and later years) soon after the church (internationally) adopted its new name—the Pilgrim Holiness Church.

Among the missionaries who faithfully served the Church was the Rev. & Mrs. Paul D. Ford (1924-1934) and the Rev. and Mrs. Ray Hankins whose tenure was less than a year (1928) on

account of Mrs. Hankins' ill health. Both couples were instrumental in the establishment of the church and mission home on Mannings Hill Road—the present headquarters of the Eastern District of the Wesleyan Holiness Church.

In 1941, the seat of administration of the Jamaica District, which comprised Jamaica, the Cayman Islands and the Isle of Pines, was transferred from Grand Cayman to Jamaica. A year later, a Bible Training School which was soon to provide centralized facilities for Theological training in the Caribbean was established in Constant Spring, under the direction of the Rev. E.E. Philippe. The school was subsequently relocated in Barbados, a more congenial location, in terms of accessibility since the majority of the churches of the Caribbean field were located in the Eastern Caribbean.

As the movement grew and developed, the Jamaican nationals assumed substantive offices; notably, the Rev. Gersham Gray became the first native pastor. In Montego Bay and its environs, the work of the church pursued with much vigor under the direction of the Rev. A.M. Reynolds. However, the church continued under the superintendence of American missionaries until 1968. By then, the Pilgrim Holiness Church had taken a recognized place among the denominations in Jamaica.

A new era began in 1968 with uniting of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of American and the Pilgrim Holiness Church. The new organization became known as the Wesleyan Church (in North America), and The Wesleyan Holiness Church (in the Caribbean). The Rev. Amos King was appointed to the post of National Superintendent of the Church of Jamaica, thus becoming the first Jamaican national to be elevated to the office of Superintendent. His tenure of the office ended in 1972.

Consequent on deliberations and decisions taken at a General Conference in 1973, the Jamaican territory was formed into two autonomous districts. Eastern and Western districts -- each to be administered by a District Superintendent and a Board of Administration. The first appointees to the posts of District Superintendent were the Rev. Gersham Gray (Eastern District) and the Rev. Noel O. Williams (Western District).

In the years that followed, significant changes were brought about. The achievements of the districts were attestation of the dynamic potential and cohesive spirit to be found among the people. The construction of a new church building at the headquarters of the Eastern District serves as one example of their resoluteness and industry in service to God. Most praiseworthy of all is the church's unflinching stand in its commitment to the spreading of the gospel of Christ to the Glory of God.

In 1980 the Eastern and Western Districts in their respective conferences took the decision to

constitute a third district—the Northern District—which would encompass the areas of St. James, Trelawny and St. Ann. The Rev. A.M. Reynolds was appointed Superintendent of this new district. He previously served as assistant superintendent of the Eastern District (1977-1978). The three districts (totaling fifty-three churches) are members of the Caribbean General Conference of the Wesleyan Holiness Church and the Wesleyan Church Worldwide.

After serving the Eastern Jamaica District for seventeen years as district superintendent (1973-1990), Rev. Gersham Gray decided not to seek re-election to that office. In 2000, he retired from the pastorate of the headquarters church at Constant Spring.

In 1991, the Eastern Jamaica District elected Rev. Henry Ewan in 1991 as superintendent. He had served as assistant district superintendent to Rev. Gersham Gray for several years.

The district continued on its path of growth. The number of churches by this time stood at 15.

Rev. Orrett Field was elected the new District Superintendent in January 1998 after Rev. Henry Ewan moved to the Western District. The number of churches on the District now stands at sixteen with a membership in 2003 of 1,233. The geographical area of the Eastern Jamaica District covers the parishes of Kingston, St. Andrew, Portland, St. Thomas and St. Mary.

On September 11, 2004 Hurricane Ivan seriously damaged manses and churches at four locations namely; Fruitful Vale, Cascade, Mahoe and Content. A number of members also suffered individual damage to their homes and property and are slowly recovering.

The District continues to hold onto its firm heritage and is earnestly pursuing the spreading of the gospel of Jesus Christ, our Lord.