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BAPTIST LIFE IN
THE JAMAICA
CHURCH AND
RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM

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Two hundred years ago, Baptists in this parish of St. Ann and country of Jamaica would be meeting in secret and underground and under the threat of persecution and not in the public and not at a luxurious hotel. Not far from here Christopher Columbus, the explorer, landed in 1494 and said, "The most beautiful place I have ever set eyes". Columbus ushered Christianity into Jamaica and the dominance of State Church for centuries. This is parish

where the Spanish were indifferent to the religious beliefs of Tainos and Africans and suppressed these beliefs, an example to be followed by the English after they arrived in 1655. In this era, religious freedom meant freedom for State Church of Rome, England and Scotland only.

It is in this parish our forebears were planted and bloomed through the three Baptist Free Villages namely Wilberforce, Buxton and Stephney. Free Villages allowed the freed to have a church to freely worship. Not far from here, Seville, the first capital of Jamaica, is where four civilizations met and formed a melting pot for Tainos, Spanish, Africans and English persons. These four are a microcosm of Jamaica as a Creole society of African, Asian, European and Tainos. Acknowledgement to this fact was made in 1962, date of Jamaica's political Independence from Britain, when the majority populace of African descent took as its motto, "Out of Many One People" indicative of our multi-racial roots and a commitment to tolerance of various races, beliefs and practices, albeit having the

potential to keeping the status quo in place of the economic dominance of minorities and entrenched colonial mentality. The motto is represented on the Coat of Arms. The crest shows a Jamaican crocodile mounted on the Royal Helmet of the British Monarchy! In addition, though the disestablishment of the Church of England took place in 1870, allowing theoretically for all denominations to be treated equally and experience religious freedom, the reality meant that the colonial legacy of dominance of the Anglican Church was maintained until Jamaica's political independence when practical steps were taken toward freedom of religion such as prayer at the Opening of Parliament was not automatically said by the Anglican bishop but was assigned to an ecumenical representative.

Fast forward from 1962 to 2013, and recognize that in meeting here in this ballroom in public is a demonstration of the progress in religious freedom for Baptists in particular and Non-conformists in general. This paper posits that Jamaica has come a long way in religious freedom from the days of persecution of non-conformists up to the nineteenth century and the integral role played by Baptists and others in achieving this level of religious freedom. This lecture will also outline the strengths and weaknesses of religious freedom and what are the threats to this religious freedom and this paper will close with the opportunities to worship God and engage in God's ministry that are available under this religious freedom.

What is Religious freedom?

Religious Freedom allows an individual or community, in public, personally or privately, to declare religious belief, teaching, practice, worship, and observance without hindrance or persecution. It also includes the freedom to seek to convert others to one's belief and also includes the freedom to change religion or not to follow any

religion. While many countries have accepted religious freedom, this has also often been limited in practice through punitive taxation, political discrimination and State preference for a dominant expression. Religious freedom does not mean a free for all where anyone or group can engage in illegal practices or have so called religious observances that harm people. Under freedom of speech a person is not free to enter a crowded room and make a false alarm about fire because it could cause a stampede and injury to people. Similarly, religious freedom demands responsibility to act in a manner for the common good.

In Jamaica, Christians are able to preach, pray and worship freely and to provide instructions to their members and provide religious education to schools they operate and regularly host evangelistic efforts to convert others to their religious beliefs and practices. They also engage in prison, police and army chaplaincies.

It has been argued by Daniel Thwaites, Rhodes Scholar and **Gleaner** columnist that the religious freedom that Jamaicans have dates to events in England in the 17th century.¹ And he could be correct. The Toleration Act of 1689 was an Act of the Parliament in England, which allowed freedom of worship to Nonconformists such as Baptists and Congregationalists but not to Roman Catholics, non-trinitarians and atheists.² This Act extended religious freedom only to a select few but excluded some Believers and Non-Believers.

Religious freedom for the Christian Faith in general can be traced to an earlier period under Constantine. In 313 the Edict of Milan announced "that it was proper that the Christians and all others should have liberty to follow that mode of religion which to each of

¹ 'Path to Enlightenment on Old Hope Road' *Sunday Gleaner*, Mar. 31, 2013 A9.

² Wikipedia.

them appeared best", thereby granting tolerance to all religions, including Christianity.³ Furthermore, the genesis of Anabaptists in 1525 had as one of the distinctives religious liberty to heretics and atheists alike.⁴ Cawley Bolt, Baptist historian, commenting on one of the early Baptist confessions (1612?), stated, that a Magistrate should not meddle in religion but 'leave the Christian free.'⁵ Baptists have agitated for religious freedom believing that religious freedom is an inalienable right given to every human being by God. God is totally free and truly free being independent of all and self-sufficient. God can be what he wants to be and free to do as he pleases. God wants humans to be fully free to fulfil his or her potential.

³ Peter Espeut, '1,700 years of freedom' *Gleaner* May 17, 2013, A9.

⁴ Devon Dick, 'Baptists at 400: Where Have We Been and Where Should We Go.' 2010, BWA, Hawaii.

⁵ Bolt 'Issues of Religious Freedom in the Anglophone Caribbean,' 110.

Role of Baptists

Baptists perceived the implications of making freedom including religious freedom a reality. Therefore, they got involved in nation building in education, housing, identity formation and political activism.

African-American Baptist missionary, George Liele arrived in Jamaica in 1783 and established Baptist witness on the island. His was the first successful ministry among the enslaved, baptizing 500 and establishing schools for their education. As the work grew, Liele and another pioneer Moses Baker sought help and the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) responded by sending John Rowe in 1814 followed by William Knibb, James Phillippo etc. These missionaries facilitated the development of the Baptist work among the enslaved, albeit with a narrow focus of saving the soul, while initially ignoring the conditions of slavery. However, the enslaved read the Bible and had a different interpretation. One such enslaved person was Baptist deacon Sam Sharpe who claimed that slavery was inconsistent with the teachings of the Bible. Hence in 1831, he organized enslaved persons and agitated for them to be treated and paid as workers. Because the leaders were Baptists it was called 'the Baptist War.' This resistance was believed to be the catalyst that led to the Act of Emancipation.

Under the Emancipation Act, the enslaved were to serve a period of six years apprenticeship effective in 1834. The apprentices believed that the houses they lived in and plots of land they cultivated were theirs. However, when Apprenticeship ended in 1838, the emancipated Africans were required by the planters to pay rent or move from houses they had built and plots they had cultivated. It was, therefore, left to the missionaries and the Africans to seek alternative economic solutions. The Baptists missionaries built

twenty two Free Villages,⁶ [the first of one in 1838 by Phillippo], consisting of houses, churches and schools. These facilitated a reasonable standard of living, stable family life and a place to worship.⁷ The early Baptists played a significant role in facilitating full freedom.

Native Baptists broke away from the English Baptist- dominated church around 1837 when congregations were formed which became the nucleus of the Jamaica Native Baptist Missionary Society (JNBMS) founded around 1839/40. By 1841, they had 13,687 members.⁸ One reason for the establishment of JNBMS was to redress the sidelining of persons of African descent who wanted to become pastors and who experienced the prejudice by English Baptist missionaries. They challenged the colonizers' interpretation of the Bible. They were engaging in what would now be called a hermeneutic of suspicion.⁹ They advocated that they were free to have their own interpretation. Native Baptists were incorporated into the English Baptist- dominated JBU by 1883¹⁰ and are no longer in existence as most of the leaders were killed.

Native Baptist leaders Paul Bogle and George William Gordon, now National Heroes, were in the forefront in agitating on behalf of persons who were experiencing economic woes and an oppressive justice system. In October 1865, Bogle and his followers marched to the Morant Bay Court-house to protest continued injustices. They were fired upon and the ensuing melee and subsequent actions led to

⁶ Dick, *Cross and Machete* (Kingston: IRP, 2010), 84.

⁷ Devon Dick, *Rebellion to Riot* (Kingston: IRP, 2002), 12, 15.

⁸ Devon Dick, *Cross and Machete*, 48-52

⁹ Dick, *Cross and Machete*, 58-63

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 89

the deaths of 18 persons of the ruling class and thousands of peasants. This watershed event known as ‘the 1865 Native Baptist War’ was followed by better governance and the disestablishment of the Anglican Church.

Nonconformists were compelled, by taxation, to pay heavily for the support of the Anglican Church.¹¹ Gordon argued, as a member of the Assembly, that the Church of England in Jamaica should be disestablished as was done in Australia and Canada.¹² Phillippo, on conscientious convictions, also petitioned for the separation of Church and State and in 1870 the Church of England was disestablished as the State Church. This meant the discontinuance of the annual subvention from general revenue to the Anglicans for church expenses include paying organists.¹³ Disestablishment was a victory for Baptists as it upheld the principle of freedom of religion, and rejected the notion offering financial incentives to a preferred group.

Baptist life in Jamaica has other significant accomplishments for example in education. By 2013, Baptists owned schools or leased schools numbered 154 or 10% of schools in Jamaica. They have

¹¹ Edward Bean Underhill, *Dr. Underhill's Letter: A Letter addressed to the Rt. Honourable E. Cardwell, with illustrative documents on the condition of Jamaica and an explanatory statement* (London: Yates and Alexander [1865]), 85.

¹² “Parliamentary Debates of Jamaica, Commencing from the Fourth Session of the First General Assembly, Under the New Constitution: Comprising the Session Commencing on the 27th Day of October, 1863, And Terminating on the 22nd Day of February, 1864. Compiled by Augustus Constantine Sinclair, (Spanish Town, 1865), 94, in Jamaica Assembly Parliamentary Debates 9 Oct. 1863-Feb. 1864.

¹³ JB Ellis, *Diocese of Jamaica: A Short Account of Its History, Growth and Organization* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1913), Chapter X

three High Schools, 85 Early Childhood institutions and 66 All Age (6-15 years old) and Primary (6-12 year olds) schools. In 1843, Baptists were the first to establish theological education which also had a teacher training component.¹⁴ Baptists made the educational system of a better standard, used more indigenous material and allowed greater access to the disadvantaged.

In 1999, the JBU had dental clinics and medical clinics operated by seventeen churches in nine of the fourteen parishes.¹⁵ There are 300 hundred Baptist Churches and many of them are used as shelters during natural disasters. They also offer counseling to persons who are troubled and those are starting a new life in Jesus.

Jamaican Baptists played a role in religious freedom through its advocacy for full freedom and the right for all denominations to be treated fairly and equally. Because of the role of Baptists in the struggle against slavery and for the development of Jamaica, post-emancipation, the Christian faith gained acceptance. According to census figures even as late as 1943, 90% of the population was affiliated to the Church.¹⁶ The Baptists, local and foreign, played a significant role in the acceptance of Christianity as the religion of choice.

¹⁴ Dick, *Rebellion to Riot*, 41, 46.

¹⁵ Dick, *Rebellion to Riot*, 202.

¹⁶ Dick, *Rebellion to Riot*, 6.

Persecution

In the nineteenth century, Dissenters in Jamaica were persecuted for praying. Dissenters would include Independents, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Quakers, Methodists, Moravians and Baptists.¹⁷ According to a letter written January 5, 1830 by John Dyer of the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) to Sir George Murray, Secretary of State to Colonies, he claimed “one of my people is now in jail, for praying after 8 o’clock.”¹⁸ In the early 1830s, for a Sectarian preacher to be granted a preaching license, he would have to register a certificate with the Bishop’s Court.¹⁹

After the Sam Sharpe protest of 1831, there was a religious clash between the Dissenters and the Colonial Church Union whose aim was to “give triumph to true religion” through the destruction of worship places of dissenting missionaries²⁰ and with the backing of Custodes, the ultimate aim was to “Leave not a Place of Worship except the Established Churches of England and Scotland standing.”²¹ Dissenters in general and Baptist missionaries in particular were harassed.

¹⁷ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963) 26, 47.

¹⁸ Stewart, *Account*, 253.

¹⁹ Thomas F Abbot [sic] “Missionary Persecution,” *Jamaica Watchman*, 30 (June 1832), 4.

²⁰ Fair Play, “To the Editor of the Watchman” *Watchman* (May 5, 1832), 8.

²¹ A Sectarian, “To the Editor of the Watchman” *The Watchman and Jamaica Free Press*, 28 March 1832, 3. According to “A Sectarian,” The President of the Colonial Church Union was the Hon. John Lunan who was also Custos of the parish, Member of Assembly and Assistant Judge of the Grand Court. The Colonial Church Union had religious, political and judicial backing.

Furthermore, enslaved persons were persecuted for praying. There was the incident involving Old Virgil, a Baptist leader of Windsor Lodge [where] who was executed without trial in 1832. Clarke related the event:

He inquired of Captain Hylton if he was to be hanged for praying to God? The savage man, full of enmity to religion, answered "Yes." Then said the old Christian, "hang me up at once, that I may go to my Father."²²

Prayer was an integral aspect of the religious life of persons of African origin but they engaged in prayer at their peril. The slave owners could enslave the body but could not quench or stop prayer from flowing freely to God. Public Praying was also used as an act of defiance against the laws designed to prevent religious freedom.

These acts of denying religious freedom to the enslaved were not random acts of social deviants but were legal stipulations. Liele experienced imprisonment on a charge of sedition for a sermon he preached from Romans 10: 1.²³ Romans 10: 1 states, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved." This Biblical reference seemed innocuous but not to the authorities. Obstacles were placed in the way of the enslaved receiving the gospel when in 1802, a Bill was passed to prevent persons, who were not qualified by law, from preaching.²⁴ Son of a Baptist missionary, George Henderson said, "The Slave Law passed

²² Clarke, *Memorials*, 161.

²³ Clark, Dendy and Phillippo, *Voice*, 32 and Underhill, *West Indies*, 199-200.

²⁴ "Jubilee of the Jamaican Mission," *Baptist Magazine for 1865* Vol. LVII, 57, and Brathwaite, *Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*, 260.

in 1810 had prohibited any further teaching or preaching by men of the African race.”²⁵ Furthermore, the Consolidated Slave Law of 1816 meant that “for the crime of worshipping God without their masters’ permission they were ever liable for punishment.”²⁶

The dominant missionary Christian expression not only despised Dissenters but there was persecution of minority religious in the late 19th century.²⁷ Jews were perceived as “descended from the crucifiers of the blessed Jesus.”²⁸ Indian indentured workers commenced arriving in Jamaica in 1845 and the majority brought with them their religious faith of Hinduism. The Chinese migrated to Jamaica in 1854.²⁹ They brought with them their Buddhist and Confucian beliefs.³⁰ Non-Christian religions were outlawed and Hindus and Muslims had to congregate in secret.³¹

The State Church was largely intolerant of other denominations and other religions in the 18th and 19th century.

²⁵ Henderson, *Goodness and Mercy*, 12.

²⁶ Phillippo, *Jamaica*, 161.

²⁷ Dick, *Rebellion Riot*, 102.

²⁸ Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*. Vol. II: 293, and Gardner, op. cit., 197.

²⁹ Ray Chen, Comp. and ed., *The Shopkeepers: Commemorating 150 Years of The Chinese in Jamaica 1854-2004. A Historical Record of Their Arrival And Personal Stories of Their Endeavours And Experiences* (Kingston: Periwinkle, 2005), 283.

³⁰ Chen, *Shopkeepers*, 302-03.

³¹ Dick, *Rebellion to Riot*, 102.

WEAKNESSES

Powerful interests whether pre-emancipation or post emancipation tended to try and influence the content of preaching as a subtle way to control the thoughts and actions of citizens. In addition, Christians in general and Baptists in particular have been often timid and mild.

In 1968, preachers were warned to be careful about what they said in their sermons in the aftermath of the Walter Rodney Riots started on October 16, 1968.³² Guyanese-born, Rodney (1942-80) was a Black Power advocate and Marxist lecturer at UWI Mona who was later declared persona non grata by Jamaica. The decision to ban him from Jamaica because of his advocacy for the working poor caused riots, which claimed the lives of several people. Following a meeting with Hugh Shearer, then Prime Minister, the John Swaby of the Anglican Church communion, and Atherton Didier, Chairman of the Methodist District sent out a circular which stated: ‘in the present state of security on the country, clergymen should not say anything against the government which would tend to inflame’.³³ This is a clear restriction of religious freedom under the guise of protecting national security. This is a throwback to the 1830s when in 1832, Moravians asked rhetorically, “Do we, indeed, preach that a slave cannot serve his earthly and his heavenly master at the same time?” and then they added, “Far be this from us.”³⁴ These ideas are reinforced faithfully by inculcating the apostolic precept from 1 Pet. xi. 8 which states, “servants be obedient to your masters . . .”³⁵ The Moravians preached what the slave owners wanted the enslaved to be- submissive, hardworking and honest. This would be an

³² Dick, *Rebellion to Riot* 95.

³³ *The Daily Gleaner*, December 5, 1968, 1.

³⁴ “West Indies. Jamaica,” *Periodical Accounts* Vol. XII August 1832, 205.

³⁵ “West Indies. Jamaica,” *Periodical Accounts*_Vol. XII August 1832, 206.

approach of missionaries in general at that time and this was a weakness of the traditional churches.

The Church as the collective Christian presence has been largely silent in the last couple decades if one was to judge the prophetic voice of the Church by the statements issued by the Jamaica Council of Churches (JCC). The JCC was established in 1941 with ten denominations of which the Baptists was a leading member. The JCC is comprised of mainly traditional churches, known for the prophetic witness and concern for the whole person. Neville Callam, Baptist scholar, in *Voicing Concern* made a selection of statements from 1941-2003. The issues that received the most public statements were 1) governance (mainly Electoral matters); 2) crime and violence and 3) gambling. It is understandable that crime and violence would receive such attention because Jamaica has a very high murder rate. However, Jamaica has one of the highest income disparity in the world coupled with high unemployment rates and low minimum wage that you would have expected some pronouncements on these economic matters. But there was nothing on minimum wage, number of persons below the poverty line etc. We also have a problem with corruption and a bureaucracy which inhibits business. Apparently the JCC has muzzled itself, based on the policy shift in 1999 enunciated by a former General Secretary of the JCC, Norman Mills, who said ‘The JCC took a decision that, instead of making frequent public statements on developments of public interest, it would, from time to time, seek opportunity for direct dialogue with the parties concerned.’³⁶ This statement appears to assume that public statements and dialogue are mutually exclusive. Perhaps, the reason for the pull back from frequent public statements is due to the harsh criticisms leveled at the JCC of being politically biased.

³⁶ Neville Callam, *Voicing Concern*, ix-x.

Thus religious freedom has often been an expedient political policy because the powers-that-be have not been seriously threatened within recent times by the majority Christian presence. The mild and isolated instances of challenges have probably revealed that religious freedom might not be a fully and rightly held conviction as it would appear generally.

There are times when Christians have used their privileged and dominant status to propagate the gospel. There is the potential for Christians to abuse their influential position.

There are examples of societal and legal discrimination against African religious expressions, with no agitation from the institutional church. It has been illegal from the nineteenth century to practice Obeah, to consult with practitioners of Obeah and the publication and distribution of any material calculated to promote Obeah.³⁷ It is a threat to religious freedom to criminalize those who believe, practice or promote Obeah.³⁸ The Church Councils failure agitate against Obeah law shows a weak commitment to religious freedom. There needs to be a greater appreciation that religious freedom extends beyond Christianity and ought to be extended to persons who believe and practice Obeah, Voodoo etc once no one is harmed by these practices.

Other African religious expressions such as Pocomania, Zion Revival and Kumina are not seen as genuine religious expressions but are tolerated for cultural and entertainment value. Even with the advent in the 1970s of Religious Education in schools as a subject rather than Bible Knowledge these African religious expressions are not taught in an objective manner and would not be received in the

³⁷ Dick, *Cross and Machete*, 127-28.

³⁸ Devon Dick, 'Decriminalise Obeah in Jamaica' *Gleaner*, May 24, 2005

schools and public functions as part of an ecumenical religious group. Up until 1998, Mormonism had a rough passage getting acceptance in Parliament. These are examples of lack of full religious freedom.

THREATS

The most high profile worship experience for Church and State is the Annual National Prayer Breakfast which started subsequent to the most violent General Elections of 1980 which saw approximately 800 Jamaicans killed in a year of political campaigning. The first preacher was Burchell Taylor, one of the Vice Presidents of the Baptist World Alliance. At the 1986 National Prayer Breakfast Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church Right Reverend Samuel Carter made his most famous national statement: "No more snap elections, no more boycotts." This was in response to then Prime Minister Edward Seaga calling a snap elections in 1983 and Michael Manley, then Opposition Leader boycotting the General Elections. Furthermore, at the 1997 National Prayer Breakfast, Dr. Sam Vassell passionately bemoaned the economic inequities reflected in him being unable to own a home. In 2007, Karl Johnson, General Secretary of the JBU, in an intellectual stimulating sermon highlighted the high crime rate in the country. These and other sermons have caused some powerful persons to be perturbed. There has always been pressure to preach what the powerful want to hear rather than speaking truth to Power. Coaching of preachers could become a threat to religious freedom and since the National Prayer Breakfast is fully sponsored by a Private sector company it might intimidate organizers to select preachers who are safe and preachers might be scared to tackle the improper economic practices of the business community. It would be in poor taste to bite the hand that feeds the preacher.

Believe it or not in 1987, on the 25th anniversary of a cigarette company, Carreras Ltd., there was a thanksgiving church service at the St. James Cathedral, Spanish Town at which the then Anglican Bishop, Neville DeSouza was the preacher and said 'Cigarette smoking is not the fault of those who make cigarettes, for people smoke to reduce certain anxieties in themselves'.³⁹ It appears that the Bishop was preaching to the gallery in lauding a cigarette company and this could be perceived as an abuse of religious freedom. Religious freedom cannot mean absolving the supplier and blaming those creating the demand for cigarettes. DeSouza also ignored the damage smoking does to the non-smoking population. Religious freedom ought to be handled responsibly.

Some churches behave with a sense of entitlement which is a legacy of the State Church. Some religious groups revel in the preference shown by the State without any consciousness of the lurking threats and those who are excluded. Sometimes governments disburse benefits to a church group that is considered the flavour of the month with the governing party. It is possible that the request for tax waivers and the granting of these by government could compromise the church from speaking without fear and favour. These are real and imminent threats to religious freedom.

³⁹ 'Bishop Lauds Cigarette Company in its 25th Year,' *Gleaner*, September 11, 1987.

STRENGTHS

There is a Charter of Rights which legally offers every Jamaican religious freedom. There are many provisions in Jamaica's Charter of Fundamental Rights 2011 which guarantee religious freedom such as any person who is arrested or detained shall have a right to communicate with and visited by a religious counselor of his or her choice; 'Everybody shall have the right to freedom of religion and to manifest and propagate his religion in teaching, practice, worship and observance'; 'Every religious body or denomination has the right to provide religious instruction for persons of that body or denomination, in the course of any education provided by that body or denomination'; 'No person shall be forced in an educational institution to receive religious instruction other than his or her own or to take part or attend religious ceremony'; Persons are entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, belief, and observance of religious doctrines and freedom from discrimination based on the ground of religion (www.moj.gov.jm).

In the 21st century, Jamaica has no documentation of religious detainees or prisoners and no reports of forced conversion from one religion to another. Myth has it that Jamaica has more churches per square mile than any other country and as of 1999, had 547 denominations listed with the Registrar of Companies and 68 denominations incorporated by an Act of Parliament.⁴⁰ There is freedom to start churches and denominations and Jamaicans freely use this opportunity.

Praying in the public space is a feature of Jamaican life such as at start of Cabinet and Government meetings, political gatherings and campaigns, before school and examinations starts, and in the middle of the day, since 1970s, Midday Meditations on RJR, Jamaica's

⁴⁰ Dick, *Rebellion to Riot*, 119-136.

largest radio station. Thwaites relates this story, "I have more than once attempted to begin a meeting in Jamaica by slapping the desk and saying, "OK, everybody's here. Let's go!" when a more experienced colleague or comrade will sternly remind me that "we ALWAYS begin wid prыз!"⁴¹ Prayer permeates the air of Jamaica with uninhibited frequency. [On Saturday, Otnel from Romania spoke about how he prayed for a safe flight as they were going through turbulence from New York and Charlotte. He said prayer cannot hurt. It is possible that is the attitude of Jamaicans towards prayer. Otnel would fit well into the Jamaica prayer prevalence condition]. In addition, every significant celebration opens the week with a Church service such as Education Week, Maritime Week, and almost every business organization starts with a church service.

The beginning of various gatherings with prayer is a legacy of Christendom that has gone hand in hand with colonial expansionism and the role of the Church played in the missionary enterprise. The blessing of every activity is reminiscent of every colonial expansion seeking the blessing of God and the Pope dividing the world among European nations in the fifteenth century and present day army chaplains praying for victory for an army. At times prayer to the Christian God is said in public space without regard to other persons of differing religious faith. But there are Christians who do not use prayer to monopolize gatherings for its own end but to facilitate a relationship and dependence upon God and as a manifestation of religious freedom.

At a forum with then Police Commissioner, Rear Admiral Hardley Lewin a policeman pointed out that a detectives' examination originally scheduled to be held on a Saturday had been rescheduled to facilitate Saturday worshippers. Lewin added that it would not be fair to anyone whose sub officer was habitually assigning him or her

⁴¹ 'Path to Enlightenment on Old Hope Road' *Sunday Gleaner*, Mar. 31, 2013 A9.

to duties on their day of worship.⁴² The Court has also made it clear that there is a place for religious observance in the conduct of work and some educational institutions have made concessions for classes and examinations based on religious preferences. In 2009, Patrick Allen became the first Seventh Day Adventist pastor to be offered the position as a Head of State and he does not perform duties on his day of worship. There is respect for persons' religious peculiarities.

Then there were allegations against the Church of restricting religious expression. The *Gleaner* extracts from the US International Religious Freedom Report for 2012 issued in 2013 states 'In Jamaica, the State Department says there were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, stating that Rastafarians alleged the overwhelmingly Christian population discriminated against them, "although there were signs of increasing acceptance". "Rastafarians said that elements of their religion, such as wearing dreadlocks and smoking marijuana, presented barriers to their ability to find employment and achieve professional status in the official economy," the report states.'⁴³ There is growing acceptance of Rastafarianism especially with the popularity of reggae icon Bob Marley, the most famous Rastafarian. Furthermore, students can wear dreadlocks to school on the grounds of religion. Indeed there is growing acceptance of Rastafarianism which is a strength of religious freedom.

As Dale Bisnauth, Church historian, observed that all major religions of the world are found in the Caribbean, and there exists a remarkable degree of mutual tolerance. This tolerance is discernable and applicable to Jamaica.

⁴² 'Crusade against Commish's Statement-Adventists Say Statements infringes on Religious Freedom' *Gleaner*, May 31 2009.

⁴³ 'Jamaica Persecuting Rastas-report' *Gleaner*, May 23, 2013 10.

Secularism is a belief which rejects religion and religious considerations and religious explanations. The goal is a separation of State and Church, not in the classic sense of not favouring one belief system over another but, that there would be no religious activity in public schools or any state institutions. The rise of secularism has made some atheists and agnostics bold in declaring their beliefs and freely expressing themselves. The push for acceptance of homosexuality is lead mainly by secularists. However, there are some Church leaders who perceive the promoters of homosexuality as a threat to religious freedom. Clergyman, Bruce Fletcher believes that the homosexual agenda wants criticism of the lifestyle as a hate crime and punishable thereby reducing 'religious freedom and freedom of speech'.⁴⁴ However, as of now there is no restriction on criticism of homosexuality.

Christianity has a historic privileged position in society and has no legal fetters to restrict her ministry.

⁴⁴ Bruce Fletcher 'Sexual Tolerance not a different society' *Gleaner* Dec 13, 2012

CONCLUSION

There was greater overt risk being a Christian in the time before the nineteenth century than now. Baptists in particular and Christians in general should be in the forefront of fighting for the maintenance of religious freedom for all based on being persecuted in the past.

In April 1998, the TBC FM 88.5 radio station was formed under the leadership of pastor of Tarrant/Balmagie Circuit of Baptist churches Neville Callam. This was Jamaica's first Christian radio station and it was owned and operated by a Baptist church. In February 1993 there was the formation of LOVE FM, a religious radio station, which included in the ownership structure Baptists. LOVE FM garnered a significant 14% of the Jamaican audience at its peak.⁴⁵

These and other radio stations promoted the spreading of the gospel through the media. LOVE FM is legally a religious station and not a Christian station however minority religious expressions are not heard on LOVE FM. Apparently public media exposure of minority religious offerings would not be well received. However, private sector media outlets continue to provide a forum for coverage and debate on religious matters. Normally on a Sunday, unlike many other Caribbean nations, Jamaica would have gospel music played as a matter of course. With the advent of Christian and religious radio stations, more airtime has been afforded gospel music during the week and gospel artistes have been given more exposure to proclaim the gospel. These various media outlets offers an opportunity to tell the truths about the gospel to the unchurched. The new media landscape offers an opportunity to reach more people and more quickly with the good news of salvation. Therefore, the Church must use the media, including social media, to provide information about its policies, programmes and principles in order to educate all and witness to all. Christian Media ought to play a greater role in the dissemination of Bible knowledge,

⁴⁵ Dick, *Rebellion to Riot*, 72-73.

religious education, allow religious offerings by other religions, Christian values and perspectives and counter any unflattering view of church by the public. Additionally, the church ought to use the media to promote and protect religious freedom in Jamaica and not just for Christians.

Calabar, an all Boys high school founded in 1912 by Baptists, hosts an annual evangelistic meeting at which all students are expected to attend since it is held during school time. Stephen Smith, a guidance counselor and former Baptist minister, initiated this venture in 2009. The Education Act provides guidelines for religious instructions. Section 18:4 states that 'Subject to the provisions of this section, the school day in every public educational institution shall include time for collective worship on the part of all students in attendance at the institution . . .' In addition, Section 3 of the Education Act [General Powers of the Ministry] grants the Minister of Education the power 'to contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the student population.' It is not unusual for schools to be platforms from which Christian values are espoused for the spiritual formation of students. Whereas in the USA prayer in public schools is banned based on the understanding of separation of Church and State, and whereas in France it is disallowed based on France's principle of being religiously neutral, Christian education is not just permitted but it is rather promoted as part of the overall development of students. This can be a wonderful opportunity to offer moral education to these and other children. According to Burchell Taylor, vice president of BWA, moral education is 'not education for conformity, for uncritical acceptance of dogmas and cultural absolutes. It is rather, a preparation for understanding and reflection, for participation in decision making on a wide scale, the pursuit of moral responsibility and meaningful sharing in the critical and creative endeavour of

shaping society”⁴⁶ Moral education will enable students to engage in critical thinking of deciphering right from wrong and making decisions on complex issues from an informed basis. This is also a glorious opportunity for young children to form action groups in order to express opinions and mobilize action on issues of governance, poverty, gender inequalities, injustices and sexual abuse.

Last year, there was a hue and cry when preaching was disallowed on State owned buses. According to Rear Admiral Hardley Lewin, then Managing Director of the Jamaica Urban Transport Corporation (JUTC) the position since 2012 is that ‘No Preaching allowed’. Eating, drinking, smoking and music are also not allowed. Rev. Dr. Garnett Roper, Chairman of JUTC, has a nuanced position on the matter claiming that ‘as far as the board is concerned there is a role for a formal public transportation chaplaincy’.⁴⁷ Whereas Lewin’s position appears to restrict religious preaching on public buses, Roper’s position allows for the regularization of the preaching in order to prevent abuse and for a respectful and organized presentation of the gospel. There needs to be organized public chaplaincy on buses and at business places similarly to police chaplaincy and the level of religious freedom could facilitate that.

As guardians of religious freedom and being committed to religious freedom it means engaging in a prophetic witness of agitating for the equality of all and justice for all.

⁴⁶ Burchell Taylor, *Free For All?* 24.

⁴⁷ E-mail March 11, 2013.