

# ANTIOCH GOSPEL CHAPEL: FROM THE START TO THE PRESENT

## An Outreach Mission of Bethany Fellowship

*Antioch Gospel Chapel (Antioch), currently the only Christian Brethren Assembly in St. Thomas, Jamaica, was established on May 15, 1994 when its first Breaking of Bread service was held.*

The blessed hand of the Lord was evident on this work from the start. Poorman's Corner and its environs in Yallahs, St. Thomas, Jamaica, came to the attention of Bethany's Missions Committee in 1990. The Lord impressed on evangelist Al Lambert, as he drove through that area, that there were open doors for evangelism there. Arriving back at Bethany just as members of Bethany's Mission Committee were discussing rural outreach plans, he excitedly shared this leading with them. Prayerfully, members later journeyed to Yallahs to "view the land." They were led of the Lord to Yallahs Gardens Housing Scheme. Today this is Phase 1 of 4 housing schemes which subsequently sprang up along the Heartease main road as the population grew. Located less than half a mile from the Yallahs fording, Phase 1 was constructed to house low-income persons whose homes had been ravaged by Hurricane Gilbert and the Yallahs River in 1988. Having journeyed onwards, the group was constrained by the Holy Spirit to stop and return to Phase 1.

Bethany's outreach programme began in Phase 1 with house-to-house visiting, open-air meetings and children's ministry (including fun days and Christmas treats). There was indeed an open door of opportunity. Residents opened their homes, hearts and even their electricity supply (to supply power for the open-air equipment). Several adults and children received the Lord as Saviour. At their request, marriages were later arranged for some of those first converts who had been living in concubinage. No suitable place could be found in Phase 1 where those who had accepted Jesus as Lord could be disciplined, baptized, and taught. The first members of the outreach team included Brian & Winifred Silvera, Kathleen Rogers, Lincoln & Melita Chambers, Dacre & Medora Pryce, Arlen Bryan, Al Lambert, Edward Smith and Calvin & Angela Williams. (Some of these persons are now with the Lord).

Bethany sought and received approval in 1993 to erect a tent on government lands nearby for a crusade. A plot of land was assigned in East Albion along the Heartease main road, opposite to the vacant lands which today house Phase 3 of the Yallahs Housing Scheme. Later, it became obvious that the developers had made a serious omission. No land had been allotted by them for a church, school or health centre for these new communities of Phase 1, 2, and 3 or for East Albion. Had God led us here for such a time as this? Seizing the opportunity, Bethany soon applied to purchase this plot of land. There a tent was joyfully hoisted in December 1993. To shouts of "Hallelujah!" a group of young men from Bethany, led by the late Bro. Fred Collins (of St. Ann) enthusiastically lifted the tent into the air. Among them were Edward Smith, Hermon Edmondson, Lawrence Nicholson and Noel Reynolds. Just before the tent crusade began the Lord again affirmed His leading. He led an influential lady (Vashti Garnett) from nearby Heartease to the site. She accepted the Lord Jesus on the spot. She alone brought over 70 persons to the first crusade. She continued testifying of her salvation while in fellowship at Antioch until her death in 1999. During that first crusade over 100 persons were counselled for salvation.

Antioch was born out of this tent crusade and the preceding outreach activities. The first baptism was held on site in a borrowed portable pool in May 1994. In its infancy the work was nurtured by Bros. Fred Collins, Ashley Lyn, Arlen Bryan and Calvin Williams. Evangelists visited, ministered and supported the work. These

included Bros. Horace Young, Allan Smith, Emmanuel Richardson, Keith Anderson, Berley Adair, Raphael Thomas and Donovan Beersingh. The Gospel message went forth with power. Assemblies in the south-eastern region later came alongside Bethany, assisting with the Family Bible Hour, Sunday School and Youth Ministry. In His providence God directed returning residents, Bro. & Sis Beresford Hawthorne and Bro. & Sis Victor Johnson, to settle in the area. They have given dedicated service to Antioch. Bros Hawthorne and Johnson were the first deacons appointed at Antioch. The "Mission of Compassion" ministry has also touched the lives of under-privileged persons in the area with medical help, medication and counselling since 1993, and with food, clothing and footwear since 2001. On account of this, residents have named Antioch "The Helping Church".

Many have been ministered to and counselled at Antioch over the years. Several have been baptized, discipled and are serving the Lord. The gospel seed has been sown on some fruitful, some shallow and some stony hearts. Sadly, hindrances to the word taking root include the strongholds of spiritual oppression, concubinage, sexual immorality and "the cares of this world". These contribute to the "stony ground" in this area. The older population of these communities are mostly stable residents. However many younger persons are mobile, some moving away in search of employment and education while others move in to access accommodation. There is therefore an outflow and an inflow of persons attending the assembly. Currently there are about 50 persons in fellowship, a vibrant young people's meeting and a lively Sunday School. The usual Sunday and week-night meetings are conducted under the leadership of Elder Calvin Williams, full-time worker Edward Smith and Maurice Goode. Bro. Smith was commissioned to the work by Bethany at his request in 2001. One of Antioch's own young men, Maurice Goode, graduated from Midland Bible Institute in 2002. He is taking his place as a Bible teacher and is being prepared for future leadership.

Antioch has weathered several storms, spiritual and natural, from without and within. For years obstacles continued to block the acquisition of the plot of land on which the tent originally stood. In spite of much prayer, the puzzling impasse remained. The Lord revealed the reason in 2004 when a second survey revealed a serious error in the official survey of 1995. Buildings erected on this site would be demolished for road widening. Praise God for preserving Antioch from this fate! The Lord soon graciously took Antioch forward. He provided funds and government approval for the purchase of 2 adjacent acres of land, the topography of which is better suited for building than the previous site.

Since March 1994 when the tent was dismantled, Antioch has met in a temporary building designed and erected by Bros. Brian Silvera and Arnold Aiken (of Galilee). It is a blessing that this sturdy meeting place has withstood all hurricanes and storms. This open-sided structure gave Antioch the additional nickname of "The Cow Shed Church" because cows entered to take shelter. Precious times in God's presence were experienced in these humble beginnings and this continues to be so. Three years later, as Antioch grew, this structure was extended from 36x18 feet to 54x18 feet and enclosed with plywood.

Now the time has come for Antioch to rise up and build. Construction began in January 2009 on the new site provided by God under the able professional guidance of Bros. Arnold Aiken and Wayne Dinnall (of Antioch). Currently the building of a sanctuary, medical clinic/wellness centre, and home-work/vocational centre is in progress. There is a vision for building a basic school in the future. The estimated cost of the current building programme is J\$35 million. The Antioch building fund, c/o Bethany, is open to receive your donation. To God be the glory for how He has led and all He has done! Pray that Antioch will continue to be an instrument of God to bring eternal life, hope in God and alleviation of suffering to the communities it serves.