



GOD'S IN E7



Local History

Until 1850 the area we now know as the London Borough of Newham was still only a group of villages, including Stratford, West Ham and Plaistow. Forest Gate as the name suggests was the beginning of the wilderness. There were a number of country houses set in parkland. Along the Romford Road there were a couple of inns, and a group of cottages known as Irish Row. These were homes of desperately poor Irish immigrants. Elizabeth Fry, the great Quaker prison reformer, was a frequent visitor here. As a leading member of the local gentry she was pioneer of christian social work in the area.

By 1900 there had been an enormous increase in population and the County Borough of West Ham had come into being. The population was 62,919 in 1871; and 267,358 in 1901. Industries and residential areas grew because of the building of the railway and the Victoria Dock. The borough had become a great seaport and manufacturing town.

Forest Gate was slower to develop, and when it did, it was as a suburban area for middle class City commuters. The Great Eastern Railway carried them cheaply and rapidly to and from work. The smartest neighbourhood was the Woodgrange estate. Most

families there had servants and carriages. Most of the area was for respectable people, and since respectability and church going were linked, churches of all denominations were built at this time. They worked on fairly traditional lines, in contrast to the mission halls and university settlements which served the poorer areas of Stratford, Canning Town and Custom House.

churches

The largest christian presence was the Roman Catholic parish and its associated schools. St. Antonys church was opened in 1884 and soon gathered a large team of priests and nuns to carry on the work. There was also a large Jewish community in the area and an active synagogue. Besides the usual Anglican and Free Churches, the Forest Gate area provided a base over the years for a large number of fringe groups such as Brethren, Christian Israelites, Ethical Church, Unitarians, Christadelphians and Jehovah's Witnesses. In the 1950s a group known as the Forest Gate Bible Students emerged as one of the earliest House Churches in the country.

The Daily News Survey of church attendance in London (1903) commented that all the churches had failed to reach the common working people. In the borough of West Ham churchgoing was slightly above the average for London, with one person in every five attending church. 32% were C of E, 56% were Free Church and 12% were RC. However, most of the borough's churchgoers were from middle class areas of Forest Gate and Upton Park. In the working class south of the borough, very few people went to church.

Church Survey 1985

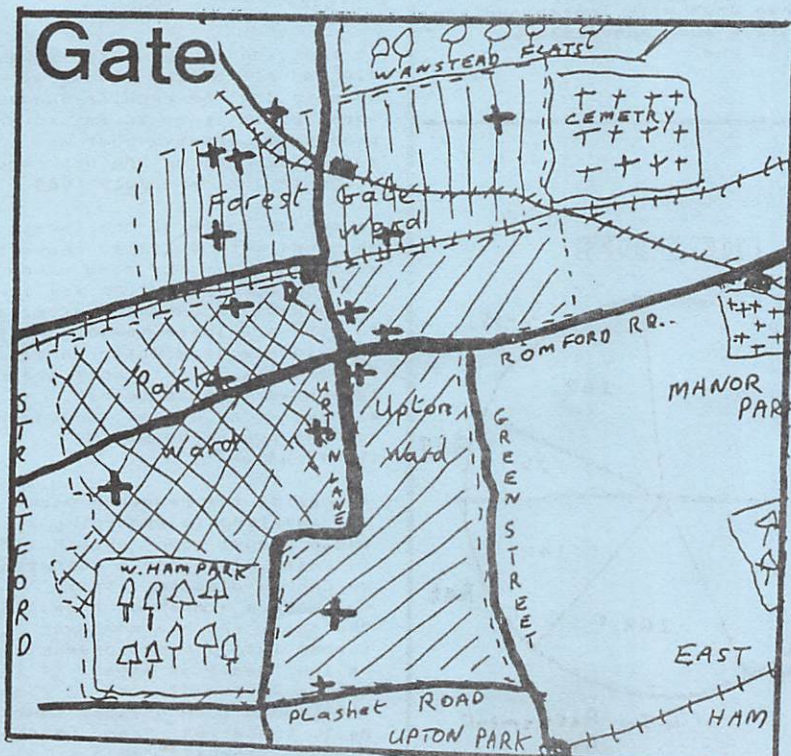
This paper tells the story of what was happening in 1985 in the church life of Forest Gate. It is based on a survey of local churches and christian centres. I discovered many things which were interesting, surprising, hopeful and worrying. I hope that members of local churches will enjoy reading about themselves. You may question or disagree with some of the things I say. But I hope it will set you thinking and talking about the work of God in our area.

The area in which the survey took place consists of the three wards of Forest Gate, Upton and Park. Roughly speaking the centre of the area is the cross roads at the Princess Alice. Except for Wanstead Flats in the north, the boundaries of the area do not present natural barriers dividing one neighbourhood from the next. On the other hand the railway, and the Romford and Woodgrange roads cut through the area, as well as allowing people to travel in, out and through the area. Because of this we must not assume that the area is uniform in character, nor that the catchment area for the churches in the survey is limited to the three wards in question.

map of

Forest

Gate



changes

In the years since the Second World War there have been massive changes in the area. The population of the borough of West Ham fell to 157,367 in 1961, and is even smaller today. Many families, particularly christians, moved to the outer suburbs and the New Towns. There was major rebuilding, the merger of the old boroughs of West Ham and East Ham into Newham and reorganisation of schooling. However, in Forest Gate only a small proportion of the housing was replaced and there are very few high rise blocks in the area.

In the post war period there was also a national decline in church attendance. Smaller congregations, could no longer support themselves. Many Anglican and Free Churches were forced to close or merge. People often felt the Church was deserting them.

Recent Times

newcomers

Many people have moved into the borough, both from other parts of the UK and from overseas. Immigration is nothing new since even the oldest established families can only trace their roots to the 1850's. And older people can remember that there were black people living in Canning Town in the 1920's. By 1981 20.5% of the population of Newham was born overseas and 26.5% lived in homes where the head of the household was born in the New Commonwealth or Pakistan. Forest Gate is one of the main areas for settlement of Afro-Caribbean and Asian people. For example in Upton Ward over 55% of the local population lived in such homes.

The change in the population has presented a challenge for the churches to build the people of God where we can all be 'one in Christ Jesus'. In the 1950s and 1960s many West Indian and African christians tried to worship in churches of their own denomination. Often they felt unwelcome and rejected by the leaders and congregations of white churches. So they formed their own churches under black leadership. There are at least 30 such fellowships in the borough. Many of them are Pentecostal in emphasis.

new fellowships

In the 1980s many other fellowships are emerging. Some of these worship in languages other than English, for example in Urdu or Tamil. A third of the churches in our area are new ones, founded since 1960. There are also traditional churches which have become multiracial, and which have found new life. There are signs of hope as many christians have struggled on and survived, as many have recommitted themselves to the work of the Kingdom in East London, and as new forms of urban mission and church life have started to emerge.

minority

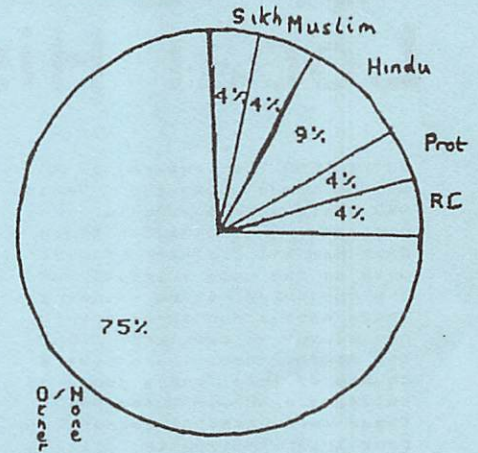
However, Christianity in Forest Gate is still a minority religion, with less than 3000 committed adults, compared with a population of 30,000. Many of the christians who worship in the area do not live locally. Out of every hundred people living here, it is unlikely that more than seven ever go to christian public worship. This is probably twice as many as in Canning Town and Plaistow, showing there has been little change in this respect since 1903. But today about half of the worshippers are Roman Catholics, and half Protestant. Probably half of the christians are black, and over half of the black christians are associated with black led or newer churches.

other faiths

Non-christian faiths are now numerically stronger than Christianity, and likely to grow in the next few years. If we include the children of these communities there are probably 2,500 Muslims with at least three Islamic centres, 2000 Sikhs with two temples, and 4000 Hindus living in the area. But up to three quarters of the population have no religious affiliation other than a very nominal attachment to the Church of England or the Roman Catholic church.

Despite some signs of renewal, the main denominations continue to struggle. Non-christians rarely respond to evangelism, and the churches have to minister to people with huge pastoral and social needs. Often the traditional churches are short of people and money, while weighed down with inappropriate buildings and unnecessary regulations.

RELIGION of ADULTS



Interviews

In the survey I tried to get interviews from every christian fellowship (21 in all) and all the major christian voluntary agencies active in the three wards of Forest Gate, Park and Upton. I managed, with the help of a theological student on a short term placement, to complete formal interviews with over two thirds of the church leaders, and made contact with them all. I used a questionnaire which gave a detailed profile of the life of each church. There were questions about its congregation, workers, activities, style of work, problems and hopes.

This contacting served a second purpose as part of my work with London ECUM. I found on many occasions I was able to pass on information, put people in touch with each other and discuss important issues in urban ministry.

In addition to the interviews, I visited all of the places of worship for the regular Sunday worship, in order to get to know people and observe what was going on. Most of the work took place in June and July 1985.

In two or three of the local churches more detailed research was undertaken. In some cases the whole congregation was asked to complete a questionnaire, and in others I interviewed individuals at greater length. The details of this work are not presented in this report, although some of the findings are introduced by way of illustration.

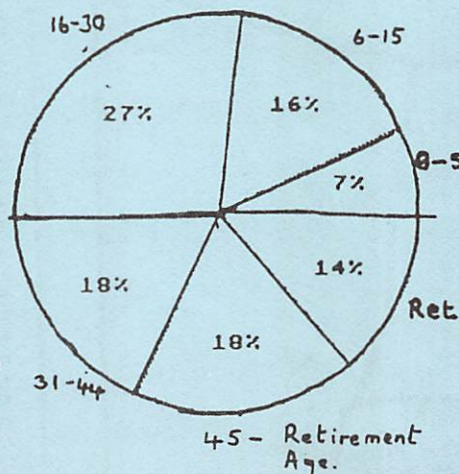
Alongside the research work, I was involved in producing an audio visual about church life in East London for a conference on church planting. This features a number of Forest Gate churches, and has now been turned into a video presentation called "Seeds of Hope". It is available for hire at £3 from the London ECUM office, Lawrence Hall, Cumberland Road, London E13 8NH (tel. 476 3651).

Population

At the time of the 1981 census 30580 people were living in the three wards. This is about 15% of the total population of the borough. The age structure for the area as a whole was very similar to that for the borough except that there were slightly more young adults and less retired people. However, in Upton and Forest Gate wards there was a higher proportion of children and young people than in the borough as a whole.

501 children were living in a single parent family, a slightly lower proportion than for Newham as a whole. 1525 people (nearly 5% of the total) were pensioners living alone, slightly less than the borough average.

AGE GROUPS



Origins

The young average age of the area's population relates above all to the presence of ethnic minorities in the area. Almost all West Indians and Asians were young adults when they migrated to the UK between 10 and 30 years ago. Therefore at the moment very few of them have reached retirement age, and a high proportion have children of school age.

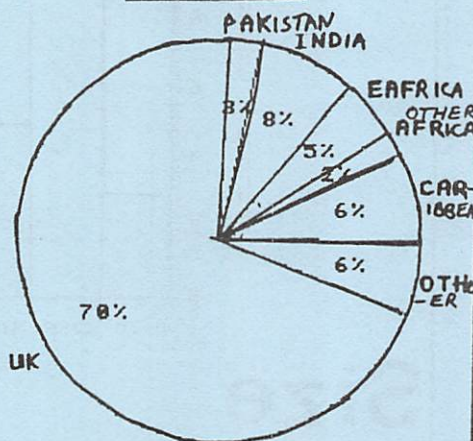
Almost 40% of people in the area live in households where the head of the household was born in the New Commonwealth or Pakistan, and can therefore reasonably be assumed to be non-white. An increasing number of these, of course, are locally born and bred.

Only 7% of people in the area were born in the Caribbean, 4.6% in East Africa (mostly Asians), 2% in other parts of Africa, 8% in India, and 2.5% in Pakistan. Forest Gate might seem a "foreign land" to some people, yet 70% of its people were born in the UK.

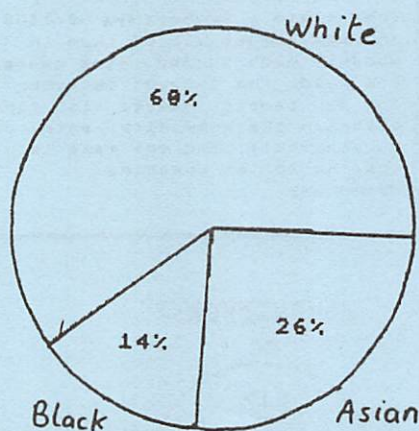
diversity

Many different groups are represented in the black and Asian population. The majority of Caribbean people have family origins in Jamaica or in one of the small islands such as Dominica or St. Vincent. Africans are mainly from Nigeria or Ghana, and are often students. Asians come from many different backgrounds. The largest group consists of Gujarati speaking Hindus, some from East Africa, others direct from Western India. Panjabi and Urdu speaking Muslims from Pakistan are the next largest group, followed closely by Panjabi speaking Sikhs. There are also some Muslim Bangladeshis, some Hindu or Christian South Indians, and a few Pakistani Christians. There are also small numbers of Cypriots, East Europeans and Chinese people in the area.

BIRTHPLACE



RACE



Upton Ward has significantly higher proportions of ethnic minorities than other parts of the area. The proportion of ethnic minorities doubled in the ten years from 1971. Even with the virtual end of immigration to the UK the proportion will continue to rise for several years, as the older white population dies out or moves away.

Jobs

The census does not give much useful information about employment but the borough's planning documents provide some idea of the workforce in Forest Gate. Less than 9% of workers are in managerial or professional jobs, compared with 16% for Greater London as a whole. Over a quarter of workers are semi- or unskilled which is higher than for London but lower than for Newham as a whole.

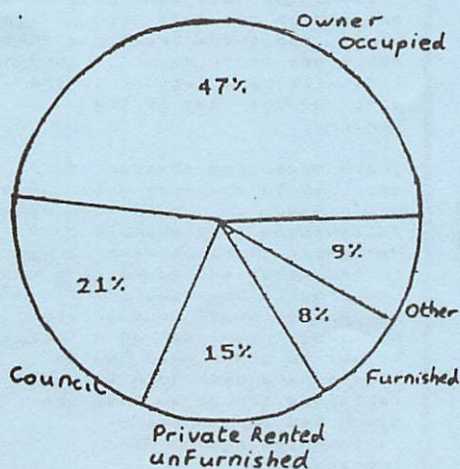
Nearly 60% of all workers in Forest Gate travel outside the borough to work. Local jobs are mainly in the service industries, such as shop and office work. Manufacturing industry locally lost 30% of all its jobs between 1971 and 1981. As a result there is considerable unemployment, over 20% of the working age population for the Stratford employment area. It is likely that Forest Gate is less badly hit than other parts of the borough. And while Newham as a whole appears prosperous in comparison with some parts of the North of England, we should not underestimate the devastating effects of unemployment on the unskilled, the young school leavers and the ethnic minorities.

Views

In the course of our research we asked many people, both church leaders and ordinary Christians about the good and bad things in the area. At one local Anglican church almost everybody thought the area was friendly, and appreciated the fact that there was lots of open space nearby. At a Baptist church not far away the most common good things mentioned were the multicultural mix, the environment and amenities such as shops, transport and schools. Several people in these and other churches said it was a peaceful area and not as violent or deprived as other neighbourhoods. A number of the church leaders felt there was a lot of hidden potential and gifts in the people of the area, and a growing openness to Christian outreach.

People also recognised a number of problems in the area. The ordinary Christians were concerned about young people on the streets, crime and violence, fear, hatred, loneliness and family breakup. Many mentioned the problems of racism, and some unemployment and housing. Litter and dog dirt annoyed a large number of people. Only a few people mentioned political problems such as rates, cutbacks, police harassment and political extremists. Church leaders were more likely to see problems in these terms and added issues such as poverty, the collapse of traditional (Christian) values, spiritual emptiness and hopelessness, and the lack of community facilities for minority groups.

Homes



About half (47%) of the housing in the area was owner occupied, a fifth Council owned, and a fifth private rented. Much of the housing stock is older properties, some of it in very bad repair, and lacking amenities. For example nearly 8% of households do not have a bathroom of their own. Only 44% of households had a car: much below the national average of over 60%, and just below the borough average.

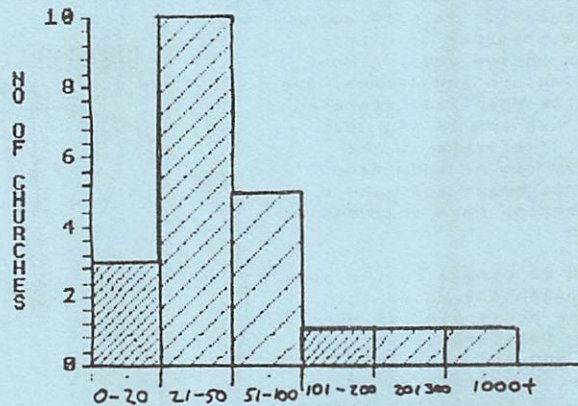
Over half the households consisted of only one or two people. 23% were single person households. However, in Upton ward there was also a large number of very large households. (15% with 6 or more people).

The Churches

Denominations

As far as we know there are 21 Christian fellowships which worship in Forest Gate as we have defined it. There are four Anglican parish churches, and two other basically Anglican congregations. There are three fellowships of the Free Church denominations and one Roman Catholic parish which worships on two sites.

However, over half the Christian groups are outside the mainline denominations. It is hard to group them, since all function independently of other local churches, or belong to denominations which are not generally very well known. At least six groups would happily call themselves Pentecostal. Of all the 20 Protestant groups it is my impression that only three or four would be uncomfortable if labelled "evangelical", although there are many ways the term can be understood and qualified.

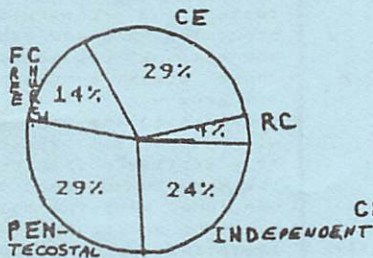


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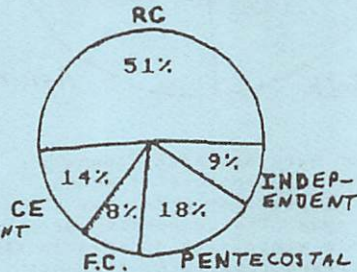
The largest Christian community in the area is the Roman Catholic parish of St. Antonys. They claim a membership of 1500 and see almost all of them in worship each Sunday. Nine masses are held, the largest catering for 350 people. Masses also take place in the community centre of Durning Hall, and one mass is for the Polish speaking community.

The next largest fellowship in the area is the 250 strong church of the Cherubim and Seraphim, which draws a largely West African congregation from all over the London area. One Anglican church has a membership of nearly 150, five churches (Baptist, Methodist, Anglican, Pentecostal and Seventh Day Adventist) are near the 100 mark. The remaining churches have memberships and congregations of 50 or less, with two or three of them reaching less than 20 people.

CHURCHES



WORSHIPPERS



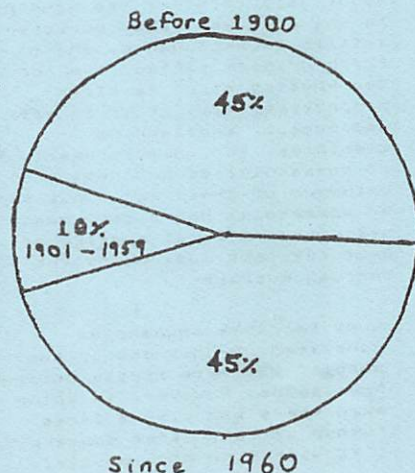
Buildings

Six of the twenty one churches have no building of their own and have to hire premises from another church or centre, or in one case to meet in a home. The buildings range from large Victorian Gothic parish churches and non-conformist chapels, to small but functional mission halls. Three or four churches have undertaken major rebuilding or renovation work in the post war period, and others are on the about to do so.

Staff

18 people are employed as full time clergy to serve the pastoral and spiritual needs of 14 out of the 21 congregations. There are probably a further 20 full time workers employed through the churches, or by Christian agencies in such roles as community worker, general assistant or evangelist. The paid Christian workers are spread between the churches in an uneven manner. The Catholic church has four priests plus several other workers, two Anglican churches and the Baptist church have three staff each. In three churches ministers have responsibility over more than one church, and in a third of the churches the ministry exists on a purely voluntary basis.

Date Founded



Nine of the churches were founded as the area was developed in the second half of the last century. Only one or two fellowships date from the first sixty years of this century. At least eight fellowships have been planted or emerged in the last twenty five years, and there are signs that new grass roots forms of church life will be a feature of the area for the rest of the century.

There have been several other churches in the area which have now closed, or merged with other fellowships. For example four Methodist churches were merged in the 1960s and moved into newly built premises in Woodgrange Road. Some church buildings have been demolished or put to other uses, while others have been sold to newer religious groups such as the black led pentecostal fellowships or the Sikh community.

Leader- -ship

There are many different styles of leadership to be found in the churches of Forest Gate. A few still follow traditional patterns of a one man ministry. Usually there is accountability upwards to the bishop or denominational headquarters and consultation downwards with chosen members of the laity, such as the deacons or PCC. However, a growing number of churches are developing plural leadership where several people share responsibility for worship, pastoral work, administration and decision making. Most, but not all, churches also have democratic structures such as church meetings and church councils or committees to elect officers and ratify major decisions.

unofficial

However a lot of leadership and ministry takes place outside the official structures of the church. The denominational tradition of church government is no longer a reliable guide to the style of leadership. For example at least one Anglican church operates locally with a team of "elders" while their full time minister is part of a wider team ministry. On the other hand there are independent Pentecostal churches which have a hierarchy of titles from evangelist up to bishop and apostle.

dependent

Some of the white led churches feel they have been dependent too long on white, middle class people from outside the local community and struggle to find local, working class and black lay leaders. For the black led churches this is rarely an issue. About a third of the local churches would put (or be forced to put) certain limitations on the role of women in ministry. However in most churches women fill a wide range of roles, and undertake the bulk of the work of the church. In two fellowships the ministers are female.

shared

There is a growing emphasis on participation of all God's people in ministry and worship. In one church 25 people are involved in a pastoral visitation scheme, in another a dozen are volunteer workers with a mentally handicapped group. In worship most churches now involve several people in music, singing, reading, leading prayers, giving testimonies and exhortations.

Worship

Sunday worship takes a variety of forms according to the different traditions. In some churches there are changes taking place both in shape and content. A minority of the churches maintain the traditional pattern of mid morning and early evening services. Fellowships that hire buildings often find that they can only meet when the people who own the building are not meeting. Thus some of the black led churches meet from noon to 3pm and from 7pm to 10pm.

Newer churches tend to hold longer meetings on Sundays: 2, 3 or even 5 hours not being uncommon. It is also significant that a growing number of churches are concentrating their efforts into a single Sunday meeting.



One interesting trend is that some Christians are trying to get involved and become influential in the life of the borough as a whole. Christians are serving God and their neighbours in local politics, as school governors, teachers, and social workers. Christians are found in pressure groups on issues of peace, housing, education and race relations. A large number of Christians are employed in positions of responsibility by the borough, and there is an active Christian fellowship within the staff of the Town Hall.

politics

However, this kind of involvement in society is not uncontroversial. A number of the local churches would reject any community involvement as "unspiritual" and some would even see serving a cup of tea after the service as a worldly diversion. In most churches there are people who would say it is important for the church to keep well out of "politics".

WE ARE ONE IN
THE SPIRIT 



Content of the worship varies considerably. A few churches still appear to use a very traditional pattern, either a prayer book service or hymn sandwich, led by one preacher or the vicar alone. Pentecostal worship services are sometimes just as predictable with choruses, prayers, testimonies, choir items, exhortations and altar call occurring at set points in the service.

On the other hand in some churches experimental and unusual types of service take place, though not everyone likes them. A few churches have introduced discussion, visual and dramatic elements into worship. Music increasingly tends to be of the guitar and chorus type rather than the organ and choir set piece variety. The gospel music of some of the black churches is lively and exciting.

Caring

Almost all the churches are aware of the immense range and depth of pastoral needs of people in the neighbourhood: loneliness, family tensions, boredom amongst kids, unemployment, the effects of racism, housing, poor health and mental illness. Different churches would tackle these problems in different ways. Some rely mainly on prayer and faith, others use a social work approach. Many churches try to combine these approaches and almost all care for people in need with a good measure of Christian compassion.

I'M ALL ALONE
NOW VICAR..



Evangelism

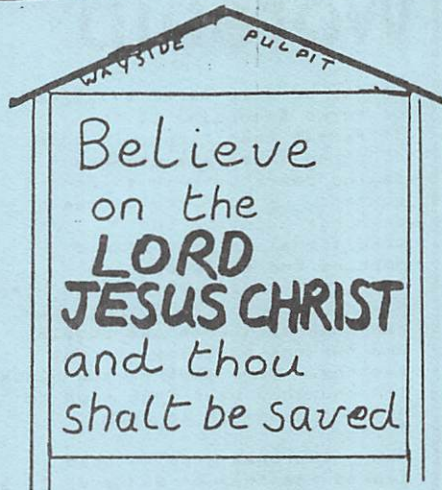
Evangelism is also being carried out by a number of the churches.

Some are quite active in door to door work. One church has recently acquired a team of young people with the aim of planting a new congregation. Much evangelism among young people in schools and on the streets is done through agencies such as Newham Youth for Christ.

One church has a full time worker on its team who is supported by a Scandinavian missionary society and engaged in mission in the Asian community. Most churches have some form of childrens work, and a growing number run Holiday Clubs with some Christian teaching for children. Several churches have occasional or regular special services, gospel concerts or revival meetings, and many encourage personal evangelism among friends and neighbours.

mission to london

In 1983 a large number of East London churches combined for a series of events leading up to a two night stand by Luis Pilau in a big tent in Plaistow. A number of Forest Gate churches, but few of the Black led ones took part in this effort. There was less enthusiasm locally for the 1984 Mission to London meetings which took place on the far side of London. Yet some people did go to these events and a few churches report that they have contact with individuals who were deeply influenced or converted at these meetings.



However, the outcome of all these types of evangelistic activity does not appear to have made any great difference to the total numbers attending local churches. Perhaps there has just not been enough evangelism, perhaps the evangelism that does take place is simply not the right style for the area. Where churches have grown it seems to be mainly through committed Christians moving into the area, or through people being led into Christian faith by the witness of their friends in local fellowships. The presence of so many Asians in the area presents a problem: some churches are not sure whether they should present the gospel to Hindus and Muslims, and no church as yet has discovered how to do so effectively.

Networks

Recently in Newham there has been a growth in 'Kingdom building networks', in which Christians from different churches meet and work together for Christ. Some Forest Gate churches and individuals are involved in these, but several fellowships and many individual Christians remain outside all of them.

These networks are based above all on personal relationships of trust and love. There is sharing of experiences and resources, together with occasional united events. The networks themselves overlap at many different points, so that you are always meeting people who know people that you have met somewhere else. One question is whether they will be able to keep a human face, or whether they themselves will start to gather funds, staff, projects and buildings and become impersonal organisations. Examples are

1) The Celebration network, alias 'Newham Christian Fellowship'. At the core of this are half a dozen fellowships whose pastors meet regularly for prayer, and whose congregations combine for a monthly

celebration service. They are also seeking influence in the life of the borough, for example hiring the Town Hall for their prayer meetings, and organising a float in the Town Show as a witness to the people of Newham.

2) The Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission has a network of Christian workers in East London, and has an office at Lawrence Hall in Plaistow. It puts on conferences and courses about Christian work in the inner city.

3) Newham Youth for Christ has developed a local network and now have a full time worker. They work in schools and run evangelistic meetings for teenagers. Many of the young people from local churches are involved in this work.

4) Anglicans, Free Churches and Roman Catholics have denominational networks for both ministers and laity such as the Deanery Synods and Methodists in Newham group. Some of the black led pentecostal churches are involved in networks, and take bus loads of their members to support each others' special events.

At Home

About half of the churches now have some form of home groups for fellowship, bible study and prayer although some (especially the black pentecostal groups) hold midweek prayer meetings or Bible study in the building they own or rent. Perhaps it is significant that the churches who have neither home groups nor prayer and Bible study seem to be the most despairing and declining ones in the survey.

Community work

Many churches in the main denominations continue to run traditional organisations, such as women's meetings and Scouts and Guides. Their survival often depends on the continued commitment and enthusiasm of one or two leaders.

Some of the churches are involved in new forms of community work such as parent's and toddlers clubs, children's and youth work, advice centres, and social activities for pensioners. However, such new ventures usually depend upon the availability of a building and are only possible if willing people from the congregation are free in the daytime during the week. Some of the black led churches are aware of the needs and opportunities, and would like to set up schemes to help the old, the young or the unemployed but as yet have not found the human or financial resources to do so.

Three fellowships have managed to tap local government sources of finance to employ staff in community projects, one in developing the work of its youth and community centre in its renovated church building, a second in a neighbourhood care scheme and a third in its resource centre for the Asian community.

5) The Forest Gate Council of Christian churches was set up several years ago to draw together the churches of the main denominations in ecumenical activity. It organises various events such as Songs of Praise festivals and discussions on issues which are of importance to local churches. Most of the independent evangelical and pentecostal groups have been rather suspicious of this organisation because of Roman Catholic involvement, and fears of liberal theology.

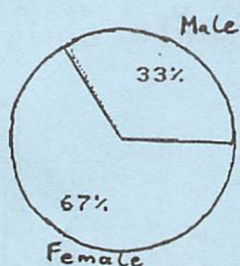
6) The Renewal Programme is active in networking on a borough wide basis and occasionally draws together Christians from every conceivable background (and those from other faiths) for a meal, a chat and exchange of information.

Worshippers

On any given Sunday (plus Saturday for the Adventists) it is unlikely that more than 2500 adults are to be found at Christian worship in the 21 fellowships.

Sex

The majority (perhaps 60-65%) of worshippers in Forest Gate Churches are women. In most churches they outnumber men by at least two to one and in some cases by nearly four to one. It is only in two small churches that the sex balance is slightly in favour of men. The lack of men is particularly acute in some of the white led Protestant churches.



SEX CHRISTIANS

Class

The majority of Protestant Christians in Forest Gate are, or once were, non-manual workers. Where manual workers are found in church they are almost always black. Only the Catholic church has made any impression on the white male manual worker, and we must remember that many of them are immigrants from Ireland. Thus the church in Forest Gate is, like the church in the country as a whole, more middle class than the community it serves.

up & out

Protestantism generally supports middle class values such as education, home ownership, hard work and temperance, and is dominated by educated middle class clergy and lay leadership. It is a religion of the book, with scripture, prayers and hymns written in words known by Guardian readers, when the community around reads the Sun and the Mirror. It is not surprising if such a church only attracts people who want to go up in the world. Church membership equips converts from the working class to do just that, and eventually to move out. There are signs that the Catholics, who have some of the best schools in the borough, and some of the newer black led churches are also following this pattern.

Race

About half of the committed Christians worshipping in Forest Gate are black, and the proportion is likely to increase in the next few years. Almost all congregations have at least some black members, and in two or three of the mainline denominational churches, black people form the majority. However, in most of these congregations black people have tended until recently to remain (or be kept?) on the fringes of church life. At the moment there are signs in some churches of a gradual move from simply going to church towards active membership and lay leadership.

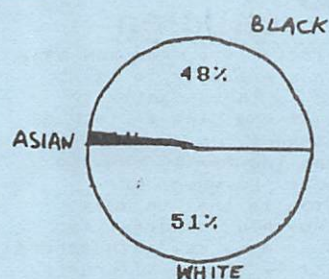
black-led

The black led Pentecostal churches in London emerged in the 1960's as a reaction to the unwelcoming atmosphere of the mainline white churches. Christians, arriving from the Caribbean found many British churches spiritually dead, unwilling to change their customs and practices, and full of racial prejudice. Black people who felt ill at ease in such churches gathered together for worship, in homes or community halls.

Gradually these churches have grown and flourished, until they now account for over a quarter of all Forest Gate Christians. Some of the churches are independent, others are part of national or international denominations. The black Pentecostal churches have a distinctive style of music and worship. There is much visiting between the churches for special events such as conventions and revival meetings. A few of the black led churches have a handful of white members. However there is not as yet much contact between white led and black led churches, other than in the role of landlord and tenant.

africans

Two fellowships in Forest Gate have African rather than Caribbean origins. The Church of the Cherubim and Seraphim is a denomination with Nigerian origins, and its congregation is mainly, but not entirely made up of West African students. It was founded in 1925 under the leadership of a prophet who had been influenced by high Anglican missionaries. In 1965 the British branch was founded in fulfilment of a prophecy. The Cherubim and Seraphim church places a strong emphasis on the doctrine of the Trinity, preserves some high church liturgy such as candles, incense and the Te Deum, while incorporating Pentecostal and African features into its worship.



RACE OF CHRISTIANS

The other predominantly African church is part of a denomination known as Brethren in Christ, an American holiness tradition group with work in East Africa. Their pastor is a Zimbabwean missionary who has been sent to plant a church in London. There are at least two other mainly African churches in other parts of the borough.

asians

There are probably less than 100 Christians of South Asian background in the area. Most of these are either Pakistani Christians of Anglican background who meet in the Urdu Fellowship, or Roman Catholics of Indian background. There are one or two individual Gujerati or Bengali speaking Christians who worship in some of the mainline churches. There is also a Tamil speaking fellowship who worship only a mile or so away.

Although there are relatively few Chinese or Malaysian Chinese origin people in the area, a high proportion of them, especially among the students and nurses, are strongly committed Christians. Yet as far as we know there are very few in membership of the churches in the borough do have large numbers of them.

The Catholic parish has a work among the Polish community in the area. About 150 people are catered for at the Polish mass each Sunday.

Local?

About half of the churches in Forest Gate are predominantly neighbourhood churches. For some Anglican churches 95% of the congregation live within the parish. The Free Churches have traditionally gathered members from a wider area, and often imported leadership from the outer suburbs. However there are signs that they are currently developing a more local emphasis. The black led churches tend to recruit members from the whole of Newham and adjoining boroughs, often using a minibus to pick people up. A couple of churches, the Cherubim and Seraphim and the Church of God (Christian Israelites) gather members from all over London and beyond.

Age children

It is difficult to say how many children are likely to be involved in church activity because of the wide variety of Sunday School, Christian education and Family Worship programmes. However, my impression is that in most public worship children, if present at all, are outnumbered by adults by at least three to one. While many churches may be in contact with larger numbers of children and young people during the week, it does not appear that traditional Sunday School work has survived very well. Many churches have struggled to hang on to their young people, even to the children of committed Christian parents, and it is no longer normal for non-churchgoers to send their children to Sunday school, especially when we remember that at least half the children in the area come from families of other faiths.

mixed

The majority of congregations cover a fairly wide age range, although there are some churches which are predominantly elderly and others that are mainly young. There are perhaps three groups which are found in substantial numbers in local churches, although none of them

can be defined in terms of age alone. Together these three groups account for over three quarters of the total number of worshippers in Protestant churches and a somewhat smaller proportion of the Catholic community.

young adults

1) Many churches have good numbers of young adults, often married couples, some with small children, who are buying their first home in the area. Many of these are in the junior and intermediate professions, in jobs such as teaching, nursing, banking, social work and local government. Many of the young black Christians in the local churches, while locally raised, are included in this social group. White Christians in this age group are mostly recent incomers to the area. Some of them have consciously responded to the call of God, in committing themselves to live in a multiracial area and to active involvement in the local church.

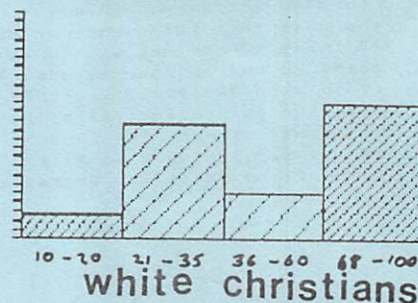
the middle-aged

2) In most churches one can find at least some middle aged black people who emigrated from the West Indies twenty or thirty years ago. Most of them, including the women, continue to do manual work in manufacturing or service industries. This group forms the backbone of most of the black led pentecostal churches, while some white led mainline churches have recently been attracting larger numbers of such people.

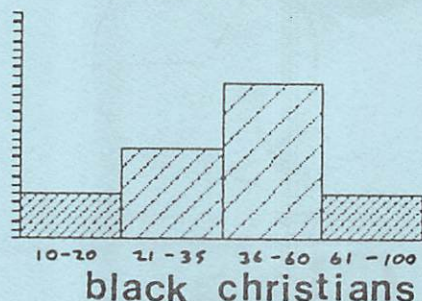
old people

3) The third group of churchgoers consists of elderly white people, mostly women, who have lived in the area most of their lives. Most have been attached to the church throughout their lives, although for those who now live alone the church may now play a larger part than it did before, when they had family responsibilities.

Age Profiles



white christians



black christians

Christian Community Centres

renewal programme

The Newham Community Renewal Programme had 36 people on the payroll in 1984, 12 of them full time community workers. It works to support local churches, for example through a monthly newsletter, through printing services and its audio-visual resources. It helps run the children's holiday projects of local churches.

The Programme runs its own specialist projects, such as an English as a Second Language project for Asian women, and an Afro-Caribbean project. It also has three neighbourhood community centres, housing about 50 different community groups, including 5 Christian churches. One of these is in the former Sebert Road Congregational Church where the "Out of Work Centre" for the young unemployed is based. Over the past five years the Centre has been used by Afro-Caribbean youth in the 16-25 age range as an advice centre, for basic education, for training in electronics and computing and for recreation. There is also a hostel project for homeless young people which has premises in the Forest Gate area.

Forest Gate was not traditionally regarded as an area for mission in the way that poorer parts of the East End were, with the result that settlements and mission churches are quite thin on the ground. Apart from the Catholic Schools, Ursuline Convent and Franciscan House, the only Christian centres in the area that are not worshipping fellowships in their own right are Durning Hall and the Renewal Programme. Both are relatively recent arrivals.

durning hall

Durning Hall is a large community centre in Forest Gate. It was built between 1959 and 1964 and is supported by the Aston Charities Trust, which originally ran a centre in Limehouse. It is a central point for many of the Christian and community activities in the borough. Besides several halls and meeting rooms there are flats which house some fifty, mostly old, people.

The halls cater for some 80 community groups including four Christian fellowships, which have no church building of their own. There are groups for old people, young people, sports clubs, trade unions, ethnic minority organisations and Alcoholics Anonymous amongst others. Over 2000 people regularly use the centre.

About 16 full time professional workers are employed at the centre, six by Durning Hall itself, and the rest by groups such as the Newham Voluntary Agencies Council, the Newham Association for the disabled, the Newham Mental Health Association and Age Concern. Funding comes from rents, Council grants and the Aston Charities.

Decline, Growth and Renewal

Eleven of the 21 churches in Forest Gate have grown in numbers in the last five years, although none seems to have experienced an explosion of numbers. They are mostly in the Evangelical / Baptist / Pentecostal / House church tradition, although other churches from the same traditions are declining or static. Much depends on the circumstances, style, leadership and history of the individual church. Those who have been unwilling to adapt to changing times are least likely to grow.

incomers

Much of this increase (probably more than half) can be put down to Christians who have moved from other churches outside the area. But within the growing churches there have also been several conversions and more recruitments of local people. Most of the other churches claim to have held their own, or suffered a slight decline, as older people have begun to die off. There are one or two cases of churches in where decline is rapid, and some cases where decline in numbers may be due to splits in a fellowship.

Growth is not only a question of numbers, and almost every person questioned in the survey said the quality of fellowship in their church had got better. Many individuals had experienced personal spiritual growth.



types of church

We reckon there are three types of churches in the area, with equal numbers in each type: Which type is yours?

1) New Churches which have emerged in the last twenty years. Some are the result of splits from existing fellowships, others of church planting and growth within particular ethnic communities. Typically these are lively in worship, and growing in numbers and fellowship. They are people centred, rather than building centred, and totally self supporting in terms of leadership and finance.

2) Renewing Churches are churches, with a building of their own, which have been seeking to reverse years of decline. Often this has been the result of a change of leadership, and the arrival of new members with youth, commitment and professional skills. Often there has been some resistance to change and attendance at services has grown only gradually. However, the change of emphasis is there, and people have started to look forward in hope, rather than back in nostalgia. Such churches usually survive financially, although in many cases there are hidden subsidies from denominational or government sources.

NOBODY COMES TO CHURCH ANY LONGER LORD..



3) Declining churches usually have an elderly mainly white membership, who depend on the clergy to do everything for them. They have a traditional style of worship and often a sense of despair. More effort is put into fundraising than into outreach. They can only survive financially because of major support from outside the area. They struggle to keep things going just as they have always been done, and people are often frightened of new ideas.

God at Work

In the course of our research we asked people to tell how God had been at work in their lives. Many testified that God had been challenging, guiding, helping them to cope with difficulties and leading them into deeper discipleship, wider Christian service or more caring relationships. A few spoke of particularly striking examples of healing or answers to prayer.

fellowship. Others spoke of reconciliation between factions in the church, and of the sense of guidance and financial provision accompanying major new steps in mission.

People on the whole found it more difficult to see how God was at work in the wider community, perhaps because they are not used to thinking that God can do anything outside the religious sphere. Most people who did answer this question thought in terms of the church's outreach, or saw a greater interest and openness to the gospel. Occasionally they mentioned growing co-operation between churches.

However, a fair number of people recognized the hand of God in the actions of good neighbours and in local community initiatives. Others mentioned the fact of Christians getting involved in local schemes and issues, either in a voluntary or professional capacity. A few suggested that God was behind the growing diversity of Newham's community, and developing healthy relationships between the various ethnic

WOT?
ROUND HERE?



AND THEN
SOMEONE PRAYED
AND SUDDENLY I
COULD WALK AGAIN!



fellowship

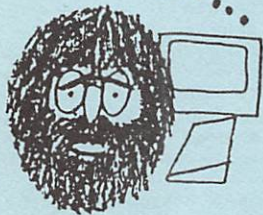
Many people also saw God at work in the life of their own local church. This could be seen in conversions and numerical growth, but above all in the

?? QUESTIONS?

- 1 Why do some churches grow and others fail?
- 2 Why are there so few white working class people, so few men, so few teenagers, and so few white middle aged people in the churches?
- 3 Have the churches been doing enough in evangelism, and in social action? And have they been doing it in the right way?
- 4 How do the big Christian organisations and networks, help or hinder the growth of local churches?
- 5 Is it right, or inevitable, that so many black people go to separate churches? Should we have separate churches for those who speak languages other than English?
- 6 What should Christians be doing in a community where Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism account for more people than Christianity?
- 7 What can the denominational authorities do to help, and what can we local Christians do to make things better?
- 8 Where do you see God at work in the life of the churches of Forest Gate?
- 9 What new and interesting facts have you discovered by reading this report?
- 10 What should Christians be doing, or not doing in local politics?
- 11 Do you recognise your neighbourhood and the church you belong to in this paper? If not where have we got it wrong?

HOW DO YOU SEE IT?

THIS AREA HAS THE HIGHEST RATE OF VANDALISM, THE WORST UNEMPLOYMENT, THE WORST SCHOOLS, THE WORST...



BUT WE HAVE THE BEST PEOPLE, THE BEST FOOTBALL TEAM AND... YOU DON'T LIVE ROUND HERE, WHAT DO YOU KNOW!



If you want to talk about what has been written in this paper or disagree with what I have said do get in touch with me. Greg Smith at Lawrence Hall.

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Credits

This paper was researched and written by Greg Smith

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Jesus Is Lord



SO WHAT'S THE TRUTH ABOUT YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD?
WHAT'S THE TRUTH ABOUT YOUR CHURCH?
WHAT IS GOD DOING ROUND HERE?