



Baptist Identity and the Ministry of Incarnation

A perspective from Luke Shaw,
past president of the Jamaica Baptist Union

“It is not easy to identify the marks of a Baptist community. Whereas certain Christian traditions gain coherence from a shared pattern of worship, or a clear ecclesial structure, or lengthy creedal statements, it is difficult to recognise any such unifying factor for Baptists.”¹

An important distinctive of Baptists universally is that we are united in Christ worldwide despite our diversity and autonomy.

The Jamaica Baptist Union (JBU), comprised of 338 churches and near 40,000 members, traces its beginning to George Liele, a ‘free black slave’ from Atlanta, Georgia who came to Jamaica in 1783. Beginning in Kingston, his work spread across the island. The Baptist Missionary Society (UK) was invited to support the work, and in 1814 George Rowe came. The expansion of Baptist witness saw both local and British Baptists fighting towards the emancipation of slaves. Such witness continued in the post-emancipation era, as Baptists helped to establish ‘Free Villages’ for the newly emancipated, buying large parcels of lands, of which smaller holdings were sold to families. Each village included a school and a Baptist church. The Baptists even established, in 1843, the ‘Calabar Theological College’ to train native ministers for local ministry and as missionaries to Africa and the Caribbean. Baptist work to the Cameroons, West Africa, was started by the Baptists of Jamaica in 1846. In 1849 the Jamaica Baptist Union was established, having seven years before declared their independence from the Baptist Missionary Society. Since then the identity embraced by Baptists of Jamaica has affirmed common doctrinal principles outlined in the New Testament, and bears such evidence in our history that three of our national heroes: Sam Sharpe, Paul Bogle and George William Gordon were Baptist deacons.

While some basic beliefs and principles which shape our identity are articulated on the JBU website², we join Baptists in sharing two basic things with peoples of the world:

- » Common humanity
- » Shared environment

We believe that while being different with different roles, human beings are equally created to lovingly and responsibly serve each other and our shared environment. The biblical basis for such belief facilitates and defines Baptist distinctives, and enables our affirmation of common truths with others. Historically, Baptists have sought to be faithful to the truth of the Gospel while patterning early Church principles articulated in the New Testament.

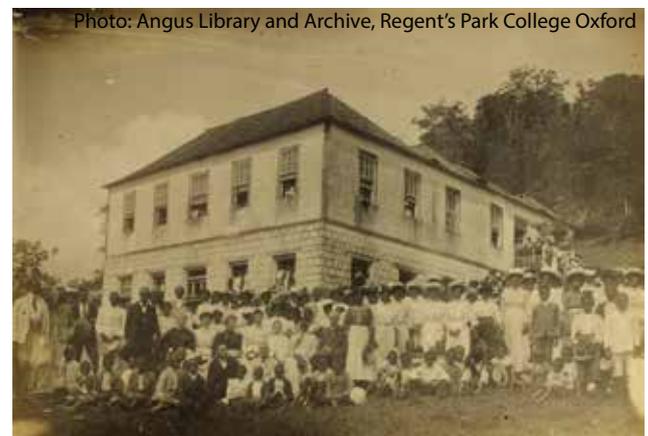


Photo: Angus Library and Archive, Regent's Park College Oxford

Baptists were instrumental in establishing ‘Free Villages’ for the newly emancipated people, including a school and Baptist church.

1 Baptist Union Paper presented to BUGB Council in November 2009 exploring issues of Baptist identity and theological authority - *Knowing What we Believe* baptist.org.uk/knowningwhatwebelieve

2 See our beliefs at jbu.church/about-us

There are points of convergence and divergence between Baptists and other Christians. Some points of convergence include belief in the Trinity; the Bible as God's authoritative word; humans created equally in God's image with the capacity to approach God; sin and salvation through the cross of Christ as a holistic reality; the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper; the Church as Christ's body; and God as the beginning and end of all things who, through the return of Jesus Christ, will assess all of life and history holding each person accountable. The praxis of such identity, shaped by our doctrines and history, results in an incarnational ministry and mission. Our Christian family, united in Christ Jesus, is called to be Christ's transforming presence in the world. Marked by equality and mutual service among pastor and people, and using the stated historical and doctrinal principles, the JBU and its local churches have sought to contextualise the incarnation of Christ. Our understanding of the redeeming, holistic, liberating, enabling and empowering nature of salvation for all who repent, challenges colonial expressions of Christianity which pursued only the souls of our African ancestors while dehumanizing them through forced and brutal slavery. Pulpit ministry augmented by practical ministry in meeting needs continues to be paramount for us. The presence of Christ in our worship, work and witness must be experienced as a holistic reality.

The holistic ministry and mission embraced through our Union and congregations, based on Luke 4:18 involves:

- » The continuing struggle for social justice
- » Proclamation and incarnation - Christ's love in action
- » Liberation and empowerment - social action
- » Education and training
- » Engaging theological and faith issues
- » Ecumenical and fraternal relations - (Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB), Baptist World Alliance (BWA), Jamaica Council of Churches, Caribbean Baptist Fellowship, Caribbean Conference of Churches, World Council of Churches)
- » Mission and evangelism participation - local and global (Jamaica Baptist Union Mission Agency)
- » Emphasis on discipleship
- » Production of pioneering Environmental Stewardship Manual and Manual for Persons with Disabilities in the Caribbean

For our Baptist family, our theological understanding guides the framing of our policies and practices, as reflected in how terminologies such as Union, Family Budget, Assembly, Associations, Local Church and Mission Agency are understood and effected among constituents. Our ecumenical and fraternal relationships include dialogue on matters of justice, peace, education, social intervention and mission cooperation as well as financial contributions where needed. Dialogue has taken place with BUGB regarding an apology for slavery and reparation. Covid-19 has challenged the church in many ways to examine how we continue to be the incarnation of Christ in an ever changing world while being faithful to the unchanging Word of God.



Photo: Luke Shaw

British Baptist Lois Delong took part in the Inspiring Leadership programme in Jamaica in 2018

As a Caribbean pastor in the Jamaican context, I serve the Linstead/Buxton Town Circuit of churches. The larger congregation - Linstead - has over 700 members drawn from rural and urban communities. Buxton Town, a rural congregation, has 70 members. Like other JBU congregations, our ministries include:

- » Free general counselling, advocacy and legal services
- » Weekly feeding ministry and distribution of care packages
- » Education and welfare support, including free literacy classes, back to school assistance, educational grants and scholarships, disaster assistance and health fairs
- » Local, regional and global mission partnerships (spiritual, financial and personnel involvement)
- » Financial contributions to local and global ecumenical and fraternal bodies including BWA
- » Participation in local and foreign evangelism and missions

Our congregations were blessed to host Lois Delong as a part of a JBU/BUGB Inspiring Leadership Programme 1 June – 31 July 2018.



That mutually enriching experience underscored the distinctive that Baptists universally are united in Christ worldwide amidst our diversity and autonomy. This ought to characterise our global Baptist family as we strive to be God's people in the world, for we are one in Christ and we live for Christ.

Luke N Shaw has been an ordained JBU pastor for 26 years, missionary pastor to First Isthmian Baptist Church, Colon Panama for five years and a past president of the JBU. He is married to Claudette with two adult children.

