

Interview with Bazil Meade, founder and director of The London Community Gospel Choir

The **London Community Gospel Choir** is an internationally renowned gospel group. They performed on the *Lion King* soundtrack, and appeared in films such as *Love Actually* and *Fighting Temptations*.

Despite the choir's prestigious work commitments, they continue to sing in prisons and schools in order to minister to others through their music.

Leah Perona-Wright talks to **Bazil Meade**, the founder and director of the choir, to find out about his background and how the choir began.



You were born on the Caribbean Island, Montserrat. What are your memories of growing up there?

I came from a small village in the country where I lived with my father and brother. We lived off the soil and the trees. We would go fishing for food – it wasn't a sport, it was about survival. One of the things I found strange when I came to England was that people will throw the fish they have caught back into the river or sea again. I learned about the trees and the plants I could use for medicine. My father taught me the bark I could tap from certain trees to boil and use to treat certain illnesses, and which leaves I could use.

Before I got to school in the morning, I had to take all the livestock to pasture and milk the cow. After school I had to go back and sort the animals out again. This had to be done before having dinner or playing. But it was just part of life and all the boys in the village had the same responsibilities.

I also worked in the fields with my father planting cotton to help generate some income. This is not that different to the activities of the slaves. Families like mine were dependant on what the government could throw our way, so we would buy a patch of land, plant cotton and sell the cotton to the government who would then export it.

The discipline at school in Montserrat was totally different to my school here in England. We were checked for hygiene so I had to go to the river and bathe every morning. My teeth were checked and my finger nails were checked. If I came into school unbathed I would be punished. Not only did we have to be impeccably dressed, we had to respect the teachers.

I look back on my time in Montserrat with great fondness and thank God for the education it gave me. Because of the lifestyle I came to England a very healthy 9 year old and much stronger and fitter than the other boys in my class at school.

You left Montserrat aged 9 to come to England and live with your mother.

What was it like arriving in England for the first time?

We landed at Southampton in February and I remember being freezing cold. I actually had goose-pimples which I had never experienced before! I remember seeing a train for the first time, with steam pumping out everywhere. There were strange vehicles and men in uniforms. It was all so different and amazing.

It was also overwhelming to see so many white people everywhere. In Montserrat there was a plantation near my village with one white man, called Mr Griffiths. He was a novelty in the area. Suddenly I was the minority in a land of white people.

I also remember waking up for the first time in my new house with my mother, and hearing bottles rattling. I ran to the window to work out what this noise was and saw what I soon realised to be a milk float outside. It seemed strange to me that in England milk was delivered to the doorstep whereas in Montserrat I had to milk the cow!

Was it hard to settle into school in England?

I got into a fight on my first day! All the lads were playing a rough game, and one boy befriended me and invited me to join in. During the game I got into a fight with one of the boys and the teachers had to come out to break it up. Afterwards there was a general look of shock from the other kids which I couldn't quite understand, but it turned out this lad was the school bully and no one else had ever stood up to him before.

I was one of only 2 black boys in the school. It was like walking on broken glass all the time until I learned the mannerisms, the things to say, the way to conduct myself and not to take much notice of the racist things that were said by some of the children.

Did you suffer from a great deal of racism?

Yes, but I think a lot of it was innocent. Sayings that are now recognised as being racist back then were normal. My mother would just advise me to turn the other cheek and not pay attention to it, but as a young lad growing up I did not want to be the underdog all the time. Because of my reputation in school gained on the first day defeating the bully, I didn't need to fight – I could defend myself verbally and it had the desired effect.

I remember seeing signs in Clapton in shops saying 'No blacks, no Irish, no dogs.' Our white neighbours wouldn't speak to us and would give us strange looks. It was very unpleasant.

I remember when I started secondary school, I had just bought a brand new uniform. I was waiting for the bus to go to school, and there was a puddle right by the bus stop because it had rained the night before. A car of white guys left the middle of the road and sped up to drive right through the puddle, absolutely drenching me in my brand new uniform, and shouting abuse from the car.

This kind of thing was present at the time. But as a young kid I maintained a certain amount of confidence.

Did all white people treat you like this?

The government was promising people in the Caribbean and Commonwealth opportunities here in England. People from different parts of the world were coming to England to work and their families would follow them. We were all thrown into a melting pot and left to work out how we could live together. There was a total lack of knowledge or understanding about each other's culture, dress, food and religion. It takes time for people to learn to live together and accept each other and there was a lot of ignorance to break down.

I look back and realise it must have been hard for the white people too. They must have read and heard all kinds of things about black people and were basically fearful of us.

There are some people who just hate anyone different and just couldn't tolerate us. But there were many people who were prepared to make a step in the right direction, and were curious about us. They would find out that we are human beings too; a variation on the design maybe, but still human like them.

When did you become a Christian?

Faith was part of life in Montserrat. On Sunday we would down tools and go to church – whatever denomination you were, everyone went to church. We knew that Sunday is God's day.

What was the music like in your church in Montserrat?

Basically it was free worship with a tambourine. If someone had a guitar they would join in, but most of the time it was just the voices with some form of drum or percussion. People would freely harmonise while singing.

If people in church could freely harmonise during the hymns and songs, singing and making music must have been a very natural part of life.

Yes. As children we would make instruments out of anything we could, like making miniature steel pans out of empty food tins.

In terms of drumming and rhythms we still had a lot of the African lifestyle and ways in our culture. We would dance and sing because there was an impelling spirit to do that and to express ourselves, not because we were taught to do it. It is inherent in us.

In Europe it seems that people approach music and movement from the head. It is more regimented and they are more inhibited. But they just need to let go and feel it from the heart. It might feel a bit silly at first but there is such a freedom and sheer pleasure in expressing yourself rhythmically. And I think that comes through in black music in all its different forms.

It is changing though. Children now are growing up surrounded by children from all kinds of other cultures and they are all learning from each other.

Are there inherent differences in the way black and white people sing?

Yes. You can usually tell the voice of a black person from a Chinese person or a white person down the phone for example. It is more than just accent, there are tones that are different.

But what I'm finding in terms of vocalising is that there increasing numbers of people who can make a different sound. For example, there are white kids who sound black when they sing – if you closed your eyes to listen you wouldn't know what colour their skin was. It is because they are growing up listening to black music, surrounded by black friends all the time. They have learned to express themselves like their friends. Sometimes I meet people now and have no idea what background they are from, because whatever the colour of their skin they are sounding increasingly alike.

We have white members in London Community Gospel Choir. They are taken on their vocal ability, not because they sound black when they sing. But in time because of the music they are exposed to their tones change and they blend with the other singers. When people come together this happens.

Although music was a very natural part of your culture as you were growing up, did you have any lessons in playing keyboard or singing, or are you self-taught?
I didn't have any tuition. It's a passion and that's what drove me. I watched and listened to everyone. Whether the best keyboard player around or just a beginner I watched and I learned.

Do you play by ear?

Yes I play by ear. After a while I decided I wanted to be able to read music, and I joined a class but I had grown so accustomed to being able to play everything by ear that I found it very difficult to do.

You do a lot of arranging for the choir. How do you do this if you can't write the music down?

I know what I want it to sound like and teach it to the choir by rote. Or I might get three or four singers together and work it out with them – in turn they will then stand in front of the sections of the choir and teach them the notes.

Gospel music often consists of a choral part with an improvised solo lead part over the top. Do you work out the solo part for your lead singers, or do they improvise their own thing?

In a rehearsal I might pick any individual at random and ask them to come out and give me their interpretation of a song. Gospel is very much about personalising the song. Each person should sound different and express themselves. It is a very different discipline from singing music from a page which aims for the same sound every time. That's what is so creative and spontaneous about Gospel music. The song is still there to be recognised, but each time it is performed it is individual to the singer taking the lead. This keeps it fresh and exciting.

Why did you first set up LCGC?

I was directing a choir in my church in England. I got together with three or four other choir directors and we decided to perform a one-off evening celebration of Gospel Music with our combined choirs. The evening sold out, just through word of mouth. We performed contemporary Gospel, Negro Spirituals and part of the Hallelujah Chorus. The response to the concert was overwhelming. Afterwards, people were coming up to me and asking to join the choir. I had about 40-50 applications over the next two months.

Around the same time we appeared on television on the *Black on Black* Christmas programme in 1982. Again, the response to this was amazing. People wrote in and telephoned asking where they could hear more of this kind of music, so the *Black on Black* producers decided to have more Gospel Music on their Easter show.

With all that exposure, the choir took on a life of itself and there is no way we could have stopped it. It took over my life and my home – I had to turn a bedroom into an office! The rest is history.

The choir have since sung with a number of pop artists, performed in films and recorded film soundtracks. Has the choir been criticized for performing with non-Christian artists?

In the early days we received criticism from some Christians who felt that the choir should not be singing with non-Christian pop artists. But things have changed a lot now. People realise that we have a trade to provide and the non-Christian world is a good place to let our light shine. God has given us music to share with others and that's what we do. The conviction I have in my heart is what keeps me going. We minister to the world through music.

So the choir is about more than just providing musical entertainment?

The mission of The London Community Gospel Choir is to keep faith. The music is very important and we must entertain our audiences – that is what they have paid for. But the main motive is to keep the message of faith of Christ in your music.

Schools are places that I have realised desperately need to have faith being kept and maintained. If you go to a Muslim country the children are taught about Islam. But here in our country we are apologetic about teaching Christianity in our schools. It is political correctness gone crazy to have so many young people growing up without any faith at all, in a spiritual vacuum. Life for them is about computers, what they see in Hollywood films, and what they own materially. They have an alternate reality. I see the mission for the choir to go into schools and conduct workshops. Through the music we can plant a seed into the children's minds.

Music teaches so many skills like teamwork, it helps increase self esteem, and concentration. We have seen music make changes to the behaviour of some really difficult and challenging children in schools. It's amazing what music can do – it is a powerful tool and we want to use it for good.

How do you find and select musicians and singers for LCGC?

We audition to establish the vocal ability, as well as the Christian commitment.

As in any choir there are some who are excellent choir singers who can hold the harmonies well, but who aren't so good up front. There are others who are wonderful solo singers but who don't blend so well in the choir. A choir is made up of different kinds of singers, your dog-soldiers, and your divas. We recognise this and make each singer feel valuable and special so that we can get the best out of them and so that the sound you get as a result of putting all those different voices together is outstanding.

When do you rehearse?

We rehearse once a week. We have a large number of singers in the choir, and not everyone can make every rehearsal, but they get there as often as they can. We have extra rehearsals before our performances and important shows in order to teach new songs and tidy things up.

Do you have any future projects or plans?

We recorded a live album in the London Jazz Café in December last year, and we have got some money together now to start editing it and mixing it. This time we are not depending on a record company and are responsible for it ourselves. We are hoping that it will be out in the summer time.

How long do you think you will carry on with the choir?

I have been taking a bit of time out this year, and haven't fronted the choir for the last 3 months. This means that other choir members like my daughter Stephanie, have been able fronting the choir instead, and they've been doing a great job. At least I know the choir will be in good hands eventually. But I'm back on the road in a couple of weeks. The choir tell me that they don't ever see me retiring!

LCGC recordings

These can be obtained direct from www.lcgc.org.uk

London Community Gospel Choir live at Abbey Road	£13
Featuring musicians such as Matt Redman, Paul Carrack, and Martin Smith	
Force behind the power	£12
A recording of self-written songs	
London Community Gospel Choir sing Gospel Greats	£10
Traditional Gospel hits such as <i>Amazing Grace</i> and <i>Precious Lord</i>	
LCGC Live in London	£10
A Live recording featuring some classic songs such as <i>O happy day</i> and <i>Something inside so strong</i>	

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