

THE LEADER PROMOTING CHURCH UNITY

Bishop Mike Royal talks about his life and work highlights, and how faith in God can help individuals overcome major life challenges, fulfil His purposes and be a credit to society.

Bishop Royal is one of four children, born to Jamaican parents who arrived here in the UK in the late 1950s. Converted at 14, by his late teens Bishop Royal had lost both his parents. However, he completed his university education, became a church elder at 19, and by the age of 25 was married and a pastor of a church.

Fast forward to 2024, Bishop Royal is currently one of the most high-profile Black church leaders in Britain, via his role as General Secretary of Churches Together in England (CTE). *Keep The Faith* spoke to Bishop Royal about his life, work and ministry.

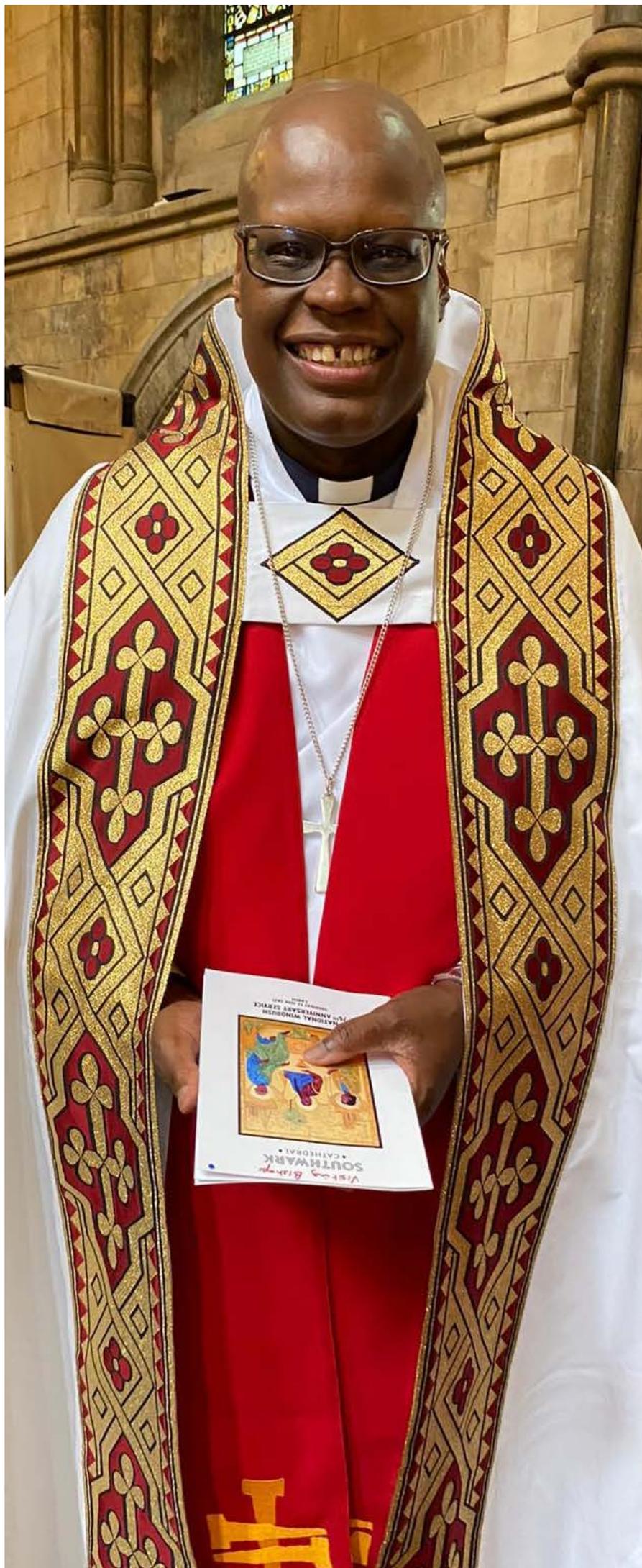
KEEP THE FAITH (KTF): You have enjoyed great success in your work and ministry; however, did you ever imagine that in your role as General Secretary of CTE you'd one day play a part in the Coronation of the King of England? How did you find the experience?

BISHOP MIKE ROYAL (BMR): Never in my wildest dreams! Never did I think I would be asked to read a blessing alongside five other senior church leaders at the Coronation of His Majesty King Charles III.

I feel deeply privileged to have represented the many church traditions which were not directly represented that day at the Coronation. What blesses me most are the many people who have messaged or spoken to me to say: "I felt represented by you being there." When you think that, in 1953, even the Roman Catholic Cardinal was not allowed to be part of the Coronation... How far we have come! Of course, the majesty of the occasion at Westminster Abbey is something I will never forget.

KTF: Anyone following your social media account can see that you are always out, meeting people, speaking, etc, but what exactly does your work at CTE entail?

BMR: Churches Together in England brings together 54 church denominations – from the Anglican, Catholic, Free Church, Quaker, Lutheran, Orthodox, Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions – to work together in unity. Connecting with those denominations and being involved





in interdenominational dialogue is an important part of my work. We also have county- and city-based Churches Together bodies to support, as well as the numerous local Churches Together groups dotted around the country. Visiting and speaking at their meetings is hugely important too. I lead a team of seven people, who also work together with the churches on dialogue around mission and evangelism, training ecumenical officers, coordinating meetings between national member churches and convening roundtables, for example: for the CTE Pentecostal and Charismatic Leaders Forum. The work is relentless but hugely rewarding.

KTF: Since becoming CTE General Secretary, what have been the three stand-out moments in your work?

BMR: The Windrush celebrations at Southwark Cathedral in London and at the New Testament Church of God in Handsworth, Birmingham, in June 2023 were a huge highlight. Speaking at the Baptist Assembly in Summer 2023 was a great privilege, too, and finally, building closer ties with the Orthodox churches have been a significant highpoint for me.

KTF: In the past, the Black Pentecostal Church in the UK showed little interest in ecumenicism; however, this is changing. How does this change benefit the Christian community as a whole?

BMR: We owe a huge debt to some Black Pentecostal pioneers in the ecumenical space. Rev Pemberton from the Wesleyan Holiness Church served as one of the CTE Presidents way back in the early 1990s. Bishop Dr Esme Beswick MBE along with others were all involved in the early days of Churches Together in England. Bishop Dr Joe Aldred (Church of God of Prophecy) made a huge contribution in growing the membership of

Pentecostal churches within CTE, working alongside CTE Presidents Pastor Agu Irukwu (Redeemed Christian Church of God) and more recently Bishop Tedroy Powell (Church of God of Prophecy).

I think Pentecostal churches have realised the value of being at the table and that if you're not at the table then you really can't make a contribution. I think there is far more understanding from the historic churches of the need to engage with this growing phenomenon which is Pentecostalism. There is still a long way to go, but there is more inclusion of Pentecostal churches at every level of ecumenism now than ever before.

KTF: According to the 2021 census, just 46.2% (27 million) of Brits describe themselves as Christians, compared to 59.3% (33.3 million) in 2011. What steps do churches need to employ to win the nation back to God?

BMR: I think the census statistics only tell

part of the story. There is huge growth amongst many of the global majority churches, whose members have migrated to the UK over the last decade or so. The Orthodox churches are growing, and Catholic churches have seen an increase in members from Eastern Europe. Key is the intercultural engagement of existing churches with these new communities. The sharing of buildings is now incumbent upon all congregations who are blessed with buildings, including long-established Pentecostal churches.

Finally, well-organised street evangelism is key, and where we are delivering social action activities in our communities we take the opportunity to appropriately share our faith as the opportunity arises. But remember, people need to know that you care before they are interested in caring about what you know!

KTF: You are a Londoner, now living in Birmingham. Can you share a little bit about your childhood, your parents and siblings and the role of faith in your life whilst growing up?

BMR: I grew up in the suburbs of London, in Purley, Surrey. My father was a Deputy Head Teacher, and my mother was a homemaker. I had two sisters – one older and one younger. Education was important to my parents. We all went to university. We spent happy summers playing on Riddlesdown Common. We grew up attending the Apostolic church in Wallington, but I also attended our local Anglican church, St James's Riddlesdown for cubs/scouts parade once a month. I guess that was my first ecumenical encounter outside of Pentecostalism. I came to faith at 14 years old.

It was the moment I grasped faith for myself rather than piggybacking on the faith of my parents. My parents passed away from cancer in my late teens so my personal faith in the Lord Jesus has been the rock I have stood on from those formative years.



KTF: We all have our own unique story of how we became a Christian. What is yours and how has being a Christian impacted your life?

BMR: On reflection, there were many moments in my childhood where I committed my life to God in prayer. But it wasn't until I was 14 years old that I fully understood God's saving grace and love. My life was going astray; I was mixing with the wrong crowd; and I could see where this would lead me. When I attended convention one summer in Wales, the altar call was given, and I gave my heart to Jesus – on 31 July 1982. My life didn't change overnight, but God gave me the strength to pull myself away from negative influences and build courage in me to be open about my new-found faith in Jesus with my friends. The rest is history, as they say!

KTF: When did you receive the call to the ministry, and how did you pursue that call?

BMR: I began training as an elder at 19 years old; became an elder at 21 years old; and became the leading elder of church at 22 years old. I was called into the pastorate and ordained at 25 years old, and moved from London to West Yorkshire in 1993, having been married to Vivienne for only 11 months. Those were massive faith steps, but God was faithful. We were both on the path to successful careers; had just bought our first house, but we said to ourselves that there were a lot of reasons to say no to this but they didn't add up. So we decided to respond to the will of God for our lives, and we've never regretted that decision once. God is faithful.

KTF: You've held various roles, including being Founder/Trustee and National Director of Transforming Lives for Good; Co-CEO of social action organisation Cinnamon Network; and a mental health chaplain. Why is it important for Christians to be involved in social action?

BMR: One of my favourite verses of Scripture is Micah 6:8 – 'To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.' Establishing and leading the Birmingham Street Pastors team, from 2004 to 2008, showed me how the Church can be a force for good on our streets for vulnerable people in our community. Being National Director of TLG between 2005 and 2016 brought me closer to the needs of young people who had been excluded from school. We realised the Church was well-placed to meet those needs, and so I led the roll-out of over 12 alternative provision schools in England. That period of my ministry gave me the most pride. Being Co-CEO of Cinnamon Network enabled us to replicate models of best practice for community engagement and transformation with churches in the UK.



I always say that when people are in need, they are not queuing outside the council looking for help, they will often visit our Foodbanks, Warm Hubs and Debt Counselling Services that so many churches run these days. We have to be willing to meet people's practical needs alongside their spiritual needs.

KTF: It's evident from your social media posts, you and your wife Vivienne are deeply in love. How did you meet and how do you support each other's ministries?

BMR: Vivienne was part of a house group that I helped lead. I used to walk her home after house group to make sure she was safe. We got to know each other, started dating in 1988 and got married in 1992. Vivienne is of Ghanaian heritage while I'm of Jamaican heritage, so we have enriched each other through our cultural backgrounds. I support Vivienne in running two alternative education schools, while she supports me when I am ministering at different churches. We both support each other in ministries we are committed to in Ghana. We love each other

deeply and are both committed to seeing other's bone and flesh of each other's flesh. each other thrive. We are bone of each Marital union is much deeper than people imagine. As the Bible says, it's a mystery. We often find ourselves thinking the same stuff at the same time independently. That's deep!

KTF: What exciting things can we expect from you in 2024?

BMR: We will be planning towards a Churches Together in England Forum, scheduled to take place in March 2025 which will bring together 350 leaders from across our 54 member churches. CTE will deliver a conference for young ecumenical leaders. We are committed to raising a generation of young leaders by offering grants through the Bill Snelson Young Ecumenist Fund (named after a former General Secretary). Of course, as General Secretary of CTE, I will continue to build our relationships with and between our National Church Members and facilitate the growing group of nearly 100 Charities and Networks in Association linked to CTE and committed to work in partnership with member churches.

KTF: And lastly, what message of hope would you like to share with readers of *Keep the Faith*?

BMR: I think in the post-pandemic world, the Church is at the beginning of a new chapter. We will see huge change in the demographic make-up of the Church in the next few years in the UK. Lean into it, engage with it, the Church in all its diversity, with people across the Global Majority world. God is doing a new thing. Don't stay in your silo, be influenced by other church streams, it will enrich your lives and bless your own congregations.

