

Something to celebrate

A tribute to ACEA on its 21st Birthday 14th April 2005



**Mark Sturge,
General Director
1996-2004**

When I became General Director in July 1996 I was aware that God had called me to

give the Black Majority Churches (BMCs) their voice in the public domain, and to provide them with safe spaces and opportunities to explore new ways of being salt and light in their communities and wider society. I was also aware that I had the daunting task of following in the footsteps of three extremely gifted men who had served ACEA with distinction.

Looking back, I think that it is amazing how far we have come as a church community. Ten years ago we did not have access to Christian radio or television, and issues such as community development and racism were still a taboo for many churches. There was great unease and hostility towards new churches by local communities and older BMC denominations.

The change in the political landscape when Labour came to power 1997 also had a profound impact on ACEA's effectiveness, as devolution led to national umbrella bodies being seen as less important than local infrastructures, which were well resourced and desperate for new partners.

In this context, one of my first tasks was to seek a fresh mandate from the BMCs for ACEA's ongoing existence and work to ensure that they were

convinced that ACEA existed primarily to support them. qually, I wanted them to know that ACEA was neither their boss nor their competitor, and wanted to generate trust and to promote ownership of ACEA. To reinforce this I coined the phrase "At the Heart of Black Christian Faith in Britain", and developed a clear vision statement.

We had very little money for such a strategic task, so I concentrated on building membership and support for the organisation and used what entrepreneurs call "sweat equity" - hard work on my part and a total reliance on the good will of committed volunteers to subsidise the absence of sufficient staff and financial resources.

Together we were able to do a lot; of innovative and strategic work: Focus Magazine was revived to provide the UK's Black Christians with a consistent and quality magazine. I also focused on mapping the churches to gauge the size, diversity and contributions of BMCs to the wider church and society as a whole this led to jointly published BMCs directories.

We also focused on strengthening our organisation infrastructure, including its management and governance. Also, clarifying ACEA's relationship with the Evangelical Alliance was a key task. Without their support ACEA would not continue to be a going concern.

We explored our effectiveness of service delivery and Commissions and Activity Units were established to bring together representatives of churches and denominations to tackle the myriad of challenges facing ACEA. Also, innovative programmes such as *Serve*

them Right! ACEA's annual children and youth workers' conference and Retreating to Advance, A day of refreshing for leaders and their teams were established. There was also a determination to promote unity and reconciliation between African and Caribbean Churches. ACEA also gave evidence to the Victoria Climbié Inquiry to exonerate the Church in her tragic death and represented the BMC perspective to government, statutory bodies and the media.

Yet, I suppose one of the abiding memories Was ACEA's delivery of Faith in the Future Conference in 2000, which placed BMCs firmly in the national consciousness. We had addresses from the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and the then leader of the Conservatives, William Hague, and many people still tell me that it was the best conference they have ever attended.

This is merely a snap shot of ACEA's contribution to the BMCs during my tenure. The lessons learnt from this experience are reflected in my new book "Look what the Lord has done! *An exploration of Black Christian Faith in Britain*". Yet we could have achieved much more if we had the financial investment from churches to deliver our mandate. We would have maximised our opportunities and recruited staff to assist those who often went beyond what we had any right to expect.

I am convinced that ACEA is God's gift to the whole Church. My prayer is that it would be cherished as such, financed and resourced to play its role in the Kingdom of God.

Happy birthday, live long and prosper