

How are black majority churches growing in the UK? A London Borough case study

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Andrew Rogers' Being Built Together project found 240 black majority churches in Southwark, south London, the greatest concentration of African Christianity in the world outside of Africa, it is believed. Here Rogers looks at how this relates to the broader picture of church growth and decline in the UK, finding that urban religious landscapes have changed dramatically over recent decades. This has important implications for public policy, including planning policy and practice.

Our *Pentecostalism in Britain* series is in collaboration with LSE's [Religion and the Public Sphere](#) blog.

Being Built Together

The *Being Built Together* project investigated the number, places and priorities of new black majority churches (BMCs) in the London Borough of Southwark over 2011-13. The particular interest was in BMCs formed independently of the historic denominations since the 1950s. The catalyst for this research was the rapid growth of BMCs in the borough over recent decades and the consequent shortage of suitable places of worship. Signs of growth were evident walking down the Old Kent Road, a major artery of the borough, where one could find 25 BMCs just in its 1.5 mile length. In total, we identified a minimum of 240 operational BMCs in Southwark, where nearly half of these were in one postcode. We suspect that this represents the greatest concentration of African Christianity in the world outside of Africa.



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Characterising Southwark BMCs

Southwark BMCs were predominantly African majority, especially West African, and although not monocultural, there were very few whites. Most (but not all) identified as 'Pentecostal', featuring long services characterised by exuberant and often loud worship. Many of the BMCs were led by first generation migrant pastors, and an international mentality was evident in pastor interviews and church names. Southwark BMCs were typically not 'parish' churches but drew their congregations from a mix of local neighbourhoods, the wider borough, Greater

London, and the counties surrounding London. While all the BMCs provided a strong support network for dispersed congregants, the larger and more established congregations offered programmes of local community engagement as well.

Counting Southwark BMCs

The most recent indirect count of BMCs prior to *Being Built Together* was the [London Church Census 2012](#) which reported 131 Pentecostal congregations in the borough. Clearly our count is significantly higher, which points to the difficulty of characterising BMC numbers and growth, since many BMCs have minimal official presence on the internet or in other parachurch statistics. Such undercounting is difficult to avoid without researchers taking to the streets on a Sunday, particularly if you want to find less established first generation BMCs. More accurate information about BMC numbers means that the scale of their impact on the Southwark, London and British religious landscape can be better understood – 240 BMCs is nearly twice all the other churches in the borough put together.

While it is generally acknowledged that BMCs have experienced periods of rapid growth in Southwark in recent decades, it is difficult to determine precisely the characteristics of that growth over time with the limited empirical baselines prior to *Being Built Together*. The London Church Census is likely to be the best indirect measure of London BMC growth at present, reporting 58 per cent growth in total Pentecostal congregations in Southwark across 2005-12 and a 44 per cent rise across Greater London.

Southwark BMCs in Context

How does Southwark BMC growth relate to the broader picture of church growth and decline in the UK? While the [2011 census](#) indicates overall Christian decline in England and Wales, this is particularly the case for White British Christians, whereas Black African Christians grew by over 100 per cent. The [British Social Attitudes survey](#) from 1983 to 2014 charts a steady decline for the Church of England, a very slight decline for Roman Catholics, and a substantial increase in 'Other Churches' in recent decades (which includes many BMCs). In London, white Christians declined by 18 per cent over 2001-11 according to the census, with every borough seeing white Christian decline, whereas black Christian growth was 32 per cent over the same period. Using churchgoing as a measure complexifies the London picture further – there was a 5.2 per cent decline in Christian identification over the 2001-11 censuses, yet a 16 per cent growth rate in church attendance over 2005-12 according to the London Church Census.

Southwark, therefore, is not an isolated case, but indicative of marked black Christian growth around the country and particularly in London. While Southwark may currently be the most intense case, other London boroughs (out of 32) are not far behind in BMC numbers and growth, and there is significant growth in cities such as Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham. It also became apparent during the project that other European cities have experienced striking BMC growth as well, for example, in the [Netherlands](#) and in [Germany](#).

Understanding BMC growth

Why has there been this concentration of BMCs in a place like Southwark? There are at least three reasons: firstly, Southwark being the [African capital of the UK \(projected to be so until 2023\)](#) is surely a key factor, although given the dispersed nature of BMC congregations, it is only a partial explanation; secondly, the centrality of Southwark in London also suits dispersed congregations; thirdly, the availability of premises at relatively affordable prices (rent or purchase).

In terms of the broader question of why BMCs are growing, migration from Africa has been a key factor although it is less clear how this plays out for the second and third generations. In addition, the experiential focus of BMCs is a strong attraction for congregants and the intentional mission strategies of the BMCs must be taken into account as well, particularly the emphasis on church planting. It is recognised, however, that few BMCs at present are managing to reach out [beyond the black community](#).

Faith Groups, Places of Worship and the Planning System

The presence of high BMC concentrations in British and European cities has implications for town planning policy and practice. In places like Southwark, there have not been enough suitable premises to use as places of worship, hence the planning permission issues of noise, traffic, parking and loss of amenity become intensified for local communities and planning authorities. *Being Built Together* worked with BMCs and the local planning authority, among others, to aid greater understanding and dialogue between these parties, culminating in the 16 recommendations of the [project report](#).

The subsequent [AHRC Faith and Place network](#) recognised that these planning issues were not confined to BMCs but have been [faced by many migrant and post-migrant faith groups](#) around the UK. Bringing together planners, religious leaders and academics, the network recognised the need for addressing planning policy and its implementation in relation to such faith groups. Launched at the House of Commons in October 2015, the network [policy briefing](#) contains 15 recommendations including improved religious and planning literacy for planners and faith groups respectively, as well as better sharing of creative practice in the field of faith, place and planning.

Conclusions

It is recognised that BMC numbers and growth largely occur within [3 per cent of the population](#) in England and Wales or [11 per cent of the population](#) in Greater London. Therefore claims about BMC church growth in the face of overall decline need to be suitably modest. Nevertheless, there is little evidence that BMCs are slowing in their growth, and the concentrations of BMCs in British urban centres may well have an impact beyond their numbers in terms of stimulating the religious marketplace. Furthermore, the Southwark case points to a rather more nuanced picture of church growth and decline in the UK, where urban religious landscapes have changed dramatically over recent decades due to rapid BMC growth. Understanding the growth and priorities of BMCs is also important for public policy in a [number of domains](#), including planning policy and practice.

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[Andrew Rogers](#) is Principal Lecturer in Practical Theology at the University of Roehampton, London, and vice-chair of the [British and Irish Association of Practical Theology \(BIAPT\)](#). He was principal investigator for the [Being Built Together project](#) (2011-13) and the [AHRC Faith and Place network](#) (2014-2016).

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

