

1955

THE YEAR OF CHANGE

THE CHURCH AT PRE-INDEPENDENCE

That dramatic service had actually begun three years earlier in 1952. The British settlers living and working in Kenya had sought a Church that had no strong clergy – laity divisions and decided to begin one. Many of the settlers paid homage to the Church of England, so they would congregate at the Anglican Church which used to meet near the Uhuru Park. A few families, who could not quite fit in with the Anglicans, had begun meeting at the Old Girl Guides Headquarters at the Nairobi Arboretum. This first congregation at the Arboretum was known as the Nairobi un-denominational Church.

The legacy of the Church was taken from the Plymouth Brethren, a movement of very small congregations, usually 50 people or less, due to their lack of formalized leadership. They were non-denominational and everyone felt at home with their different religious backgrounds back then. The Plymouth Brethren originated among the educated elite in England and did not need pastors because they were all educated and trained. Their devotion to the scriptures has been admired for years. True to the congregation's desire to not have a strong clergy-laity division, there was no pastor. This would be true for 37

years!

Although few in number, these early Chapelites have been said to have had a great impact on missions. Desiring to expand its reach beyond its doors, the Chapel began two new endeavours in the mid to late 1950s. The first was to broadcast an evangelistic evening service called the 'Gospel Hour' on the Voice of Kenya (now KBC) radio. The

show quickly grew in popularity so much so that people from across the City would come to the Chapel to see what they had been hearing on radio.



Word quickly spread about this Church and the numbers began growing such that the Arboretum could not contain the congregation. With a desire to expand its influence and a congregation that was fast growing, the Church purchased prime land on Protectorate Road (now Mamlaka). Its first building was a little tin building located smack in the middle of Protectorate Road in pre-Independence Nairobi. In 1957, the Chapel began a Sunday school at the boys and girls boarding schools nearby. The purpose was clearly evangelism. In fact, there would be days when 15 or more children would commit their lives to Christ on a given Sunday! Following Sunday school, young men would pass out gospel tracts in the outer districts. Not surprisingly, many children, youth, and adults committed their lives to Christ and began attending the Nairobi Chapel through both of these new initiatives. The growth was so tremendous that Chapel soon had to expand its sanctuary even though it had just been built!

CHANGES AT POST-INDEPENDENCE

The growth of Nairobi Chapel, however, would soon reverse itself dramatically. Two major events caused a rapid decline in numbers in the 1960s. The clamour for independence had been won and in 1963, Kenya was granted independence from the British colonial rule. Since many of the congregants were members of the British army, they immediately moved back to Britain. From its inception, Nairobi Chapel targeted the expatriate white community in Nairobi. While it did not exclude Kenyans from its fellowship, Chapel drew mainly from the white community in Nairobi. Nairobi too was rapidly expanding.

The Chapel, which had been in the middle of a residential area on the outskirts of the City, soon found its neighbourhood vacated as the residents sought to move away to make room for this expansion. Those members who relocated to the outlying suburbs started attending Churches there. Previously, the Church had not made any obvious attempts at reaching the locals; particularly the students of the nearby Royal College, which itself had experienced tremendous growth during this period. The students saw the Chapel as an 'all white' Church and were reluctant to join the services, limiting the Chapel's impact on the campus.

Over the next several years, Chapel's membership continued to decline. Yet in the midst of this decline, there was clear evidence that God was still working at Nairobi Chapel. For instance, while the adult membership at Nairobi Chapel in 1972 had dwindled down to 45 members, the Sunday school boasted of 70 children. By 1975 the Sunday school grew to the point where the Chapel had to start a junior Bible class. Likewise the 'Gospel Hour' radio broadcasts continued to have an impact across Nairobi despite the low numbers in attendance.

As the Church entered the 80s, even these ministries faced hardship. In the early 1980s membership had dropped to around thirty people. By 1988 the membership dropped to an all-time low of twenty people. The tithes and offerings coming from this group was not enough to support the running of the Church.

Facing the reality of a declining Church that could no longer support its ministries financially, the remaining members of the Chapel decided to pray. Mureithi Muita, an African member of Chapel in its early days notes that, "The Lord started to stir the hearts of the congregation and leadership to evaluate the reason for their existence. A nagging feeling began to permeate the hearts of many of us that something needed to be done to revamp the Church; that God was in the process of doing a new thing at the Chapel." In fact, in 1989 the members took the drastic step of suspending the evening services to devote the time to pray for the direction of the Chapel. Bernard Wilson, a member of Chapel from 1957 until the early 1990's and part of this faithful group of people, says "where men and women are committed to the will of God, God honours that commitment and causes fruit to be produced."

This is exactly what happened. As they prayed, the members began to increasingly feel that God was asking the Church to indigenize so that it could grow spiritually, financially, and numerically. Furthermore, Chapel wanted to increase its influence amongst the students of the University of Nairobi. With this desire, the members of Nairobi Chapel approached Nairobi Baptist Church (NBC) for help through Rev. Mutava Musyimi who had previously been invited to minister to the congregation. After prayer and consideration, Nairobi Baptist Church through Rev. Mutava sent an intern, Oscar Muriu, his wife, and seven other families to lead the Church. A new dawn had just begun.

CHAPEL IN THE EARLY 90S

With a new focus on evangelism and vibrant contemporary worship, Chapel soon found itself flooded with students and young families. As Nairobi Chapel grew, new ministries started springing up including discipleship, community outreach to the poor, and counselling. By 1993, the number of people attending the Chapel was so great that, despite multiple services, the sanctuary was no longer adequate to hold the numbers. Many would stand outside throughout the entire service. Thus, another expansion project of the sanctuary was necessary with wings added to both sides, allowing the Church to hold twice as many as it had previously. Likewise, it was soon necessary to construct Sunday school classrooms for the rising number of children.

Through the mid to late 1990s the Chapel continued to grow at an extraordinary rate. In fact, Nairobi Chapel hit a 6000% growth rate in just ten years! It became necessary to not only hold multiple worship services at the current location but to hold simultaneous worship services at Ufungamano House further down Mamlaka Road. With this expansion, Chapel found itself holding seven worship services each weekend, and a separate worship service (SALT) for university students on Thursday nights where five to six hundred students meet each week. Chapel even started a Sunday afternoon Chinese service for the growing number of Chinese business men and women in Nairobi. Today, approximately 3,500 people attend Nairobi Chapel.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS AT NAIROBI CHAPEL

In 1999 the leaders of Nairobi Chapel began praying about the need to move to a larger property to cater for the rapidly growing congregation. In 2000, God answered these prayers by providing a 14.2 acre plot off Ngong Road which could eventually be used not only for a large Church that could cater to 20,000, but also for a school, a publishing house, a computer institute, a medical clinic for the people of Kibera, and a multi-media studio. God's supernatural work would once again be evident. As the deadline approached for the full payment of the Kshs. 40M Chapel found itself several million behind. At this point Oscar decided that he and the leaders would simply pray that God would miraculously bring in the money by the celebration service that had been scheduled at Bomas of Kenya. God proved faithful once again!

Only a couple of days before the service, Chapel received an extremely generous unsolicited gift that brought the amount raised to Kshs. 40M! But God was not done. Believing that God wanted Chapel to tithe from this Kshs. 40M to ministries in need, Pst. Oscar announced to the congregation that God had provided the Kshs. 40M but since they were going to tithe; there would still be a Kshs. 4M deficit that needed to be filled within a few days. The night before the full payment was due, once again Chapel received an unsolicited gift that covered the Kshs. 4M! Over the next three years, as Chapel planned to move onto the new property, the congregation raised a total of Kshs. 74M through a summit climb to Mt. Kenya, as well as other fundraising initiatives.

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THE WORSHIP TEAM

At the core of the Chapel's rebirth in 1989 was a commitment to vibrant contemporary worship music. Led by the late Peter Macharia, a team of young musicians began this dramatic change in the worship style. Now instead of an organ there were keyboards, drums, electric guitars, and bass guitars. The new worship team, working under the notion that students are attracted by good music, began to develop a unique style. In fact, Pst. Oscar was so committed to having excellent worship that he taught himself how to use the P.A. system, often running it before he would get up to preach! Muriithi Wanjau, a member of the original worship team, remembers that when the team began there would often times be more people in the worship team than in the congregation! In order to alleviate this problem, some of the worship team members would sit in the audience with the rest of the congregation. This problem would not last long, however.

As the numbers grew, so did the worship team's ability. Soon they began to write their own compositions, formed a choir, produced cantatas, and attracted top quality musicians from Nairobi. One of these musicians was Marcy Nderitu (now Muhia) who in 1992 assumed leadership of the worship ministry. Gifted with an extraordinary voice and ability to train others, Marcy continued the fast growth of the worship ministry. The worship team writing its own songs and developed a distinctive, lively, African approach to worship.

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At the core of the Chapel's rebirth in 1989 was a commitment to vibrant contemporary worship music. Led by the late Peter Macharia, a team of young musicians began this dramatic change in the worship style. Now instead of an organ there were keyboards, drums, electric guitars, and bass guitars. The new worship team, working under the notion that students are attracted by good music, began to develop a unique style. In fact, Pst. Oscar was so committed to having excellent worship that he taught himself how to use the P.A. system, often running it before he would get up to preach! Muriithi Wanjau, a member of the original worship team, remembers that when the team began there would often times be more people in the worship team than in the congregation! In order to alleviate this problem, some of the worship team members would sit in the audience with the rest of the congregation. This problem would not last long, however.

As the numbers grew, so did the worship team's ability. Soon they began to write their own compositions, formed a choir, produced cantatas, and attracted top quality musicians from Nairobi. One of these musicians was Marcy Nderitu (now Muhia) who in 1992 assumed leadership of the worship ministry. Gifted with an extraordinary voice and ability to train others, Marcy continued the fast growth of the worship ministry. The worship team writing its own songs and developed a distinctive, lively, African approach to worship.

Chapel members found themselves not only singing the songs but dancing in the aisles. Soon Chapel began to produce its own live worship albums, with its first album, Milele Shukurani (Forever Grateful), selling many copies throughout East Africa. This would be followed by Ni Wewe Tu (Only You), Imbeni Africa (Africa Sing), Nakutamani (My Soul Longs for You), Tangaza (Proclaim), Sehemu Yangu (instrumental), Furahini, Sifa Kwako, Ahsante (Thank You) throughout Nairobi continue to play the songs from these albums regularly.

With the number of services expanding to seven the worship was forced to multiply itself rapidly. By 2002, more than one hundred people comprised eight separate worship teams. In addition, Chapel worship leaders started separate music ministries such as Sauti Music and SIFA with the purpose of reaching out beyond Chapel's walls during the week. During this growth Bob Kikuyu and Kyama Mugambi continued the strong leadership of Marcy. The worship ministry continues to be a defining mark of Nairobi Chapel. As Dick Robinson, Senior Associate Pastor of Elmbrook Church (USA), says, "You have never worshiped until you have worshiped at Nairobi Chapel!"

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Since 1989, leadership development has been at the core of Nairobi Chapel. Oscar's desire has always been to leave a legacy of leaders in the African church. One of the major ways Chapel has been able to do this has been through the internship program. Started in 1990, the internship program is a one-year intensive program that develops both ministry and life skills. Since its inception, the internship program has graduated 85 individuals who have gone on to full-time ministry (many of the pastoral staff are former interns) or re-entered the cooperate world. The reputation for this program has grown to the point that people from around the world continue to take part in the program.

Muriithi Wanjau, a former intern and the Senior Pastor at Mavuno Church, Hill City says that it was through the internship that God began to show him the call he had placed on his life, leading him out of pharmacy into full-time ministry. He writes, "Nairobi Chapel is one of the few churches I have come across that has an effective leadership development plan for young leaders. The internship at the Chapel is intentionally a world-class program and I have not seen an equivalent...I believe that the Chapel is intentionally developing leaders who will play a key role in shaping our country's history in the coming millennium." Likewise, Cari Pattison, a former international intern, says "It challenged and stretched me to the core, and I had a fabulous year...learning more than I ever thought possible...I'd do it again in a second!"

Word quickly spread about this Church and the numbers began growing such that the Arboretum could not contain the congregation. With a desire to expand its influence and a congregation that was fast growing, the Church purchased prime land on Protectorate Road (now Mamlaka). Its first building was a little tin building located smack in the middle of Protectorate Road in pre-Independence Nairobi. In 1957, the Chapel began a Sunday school at the boys and girls boarding schools nearby. The purpose was clearly evangelism. In fact, there would be days when 15 or more children would commit their lives to Christ on a given Sunday! Following Sunday school, young men would pass out gospel tracts in the outer districts. Not surprisingly, many children, youth, and adults committed their lives to Christ and began attending the Nairobi Chapel through both of these new initiatives. The growth was so tremendous that Chapel soon had to expand its sanctuary even though it had just been built!

CHANGES AT POST-INDEPENDENCE

The growth of Nairobi Chapel, however, would soon reverse itself dramatically. Two major events caused a rapid decline in numbers in the 1960s. The clamour for independence had been won and in 1963, Kenya was granted independence from the British colonial rule. Since many of the congregants were members of the British army, they immediately moved back to Britain. From its inception, Nairobi Chapel targeted the expatriate white community in Nairobi. While it did not exclude Kenyans from its fellowship, Chapel drew mainly from the white community in Nairobi. Nairobi too was rapidly expanding.

The Chapel, which had been in the middle of a residential area on the outskirts of the City, soon found its neighbourhood vacated as the residents sought to move away to make room for this expansion. Those members who relocated to the outlying suburbs started attending Churches there. Previously, the Church had not made any obvious attempts at reaching the locals; particularly the students of the nearby Royal College, which itself had experienced tremendous growth during this period. The students saw the Chapel as an 'all white' Church and were reluctant to join the services, limiting the Chapel's impact on the campus.

Over the next several years, Chapel's membership continued to decline. Yet in the midst of this decline, there was clear evidence that God was still working at Nairobi Chapel. For instance, while the adult membership at Nairobi Chapel in 1972 had dwindled down to 45 members, the Sunday school boasted of 70 children. By 1975 the Sunday school grew to the point where the Chapel had to start a junior Bible class. Likewise the 'Gospel Hour' radio broadcasts continued to have an impact across Nairobi despite the low numbers in attendance.

As the Church entered the 80s, even these ministries faced hardship. In the early 1980s membership had dropped to around thirty people. By 1988 the membership dropped to an all-time low of twenty people. The tithes and offerings coming from this group was not enough to support the running of the Church.

Facing the reality of a declining Church that could no longer support its ministries financially, the remaining members of the Chapel decided to pray. Mureithi Muita, an African member of Chapel in its early days notes that, "The Lord started to stir the hearts of the congregation and leadership to evaluate the reason for their existence. A nagging feeling began to permeate the hearts of many of us that something needed to be done to revamp the Church; that God was in the process of doing a new thing at the Chapel." In fact, in 1989 the members took the drastic step of suspending the evening services to devote the time to pray for the direction of the Chapel. Bernard Wilson, a member of Chapel from 195