

Introduction

When Christopher Columbus landed in Jamaica in 1494, he described the island in his log book as “...the fairest land my eyes have ever seen”. A tropical paradise, Jamaica is an island of extraordinary beauty. Birthplace to Bob Marley, the infamous reggae icon, the island is seen by music lovers as the home of reggae – one of the most influential styles of world popular music. Yet, despite having the largest number of churches per square mile in the world, and producing the likes of Linford Christie and Blue Mountain coffee, Jamaica is an island battling impoverishment, violence and illicit drug smuggling.



History

Prior to Christopher Columbus' arrival in Jamaica in 1494, Arawaks inhabited the island. Contact with the Spanish brought new diseases and harsh treatment, leading to the disappearance of Arawak communities within 70 to 80 years.

Columbus reached Jamaica on his second voyage to the 'New World', but it was his son, Diego Colón, who conquered the island in 1509 and brought it under Spanish control. The Spanish used Jamaica as a base for supporting conquest of the Americas.

In 1655 a British expedition defeated the Spanish and gained control of the island. Britain based the economy of the island on slave labour – originally indentured European labour, and later the importation of African slaves. Over 200,000 people were brought from Africa to work on the sugarcane and cotton plantations and cattle ranches. Slave labour brought great prosperity to the British plantation owners and to port cities such as Liverpool and Bristol.

During the 18th century the anti-slavery movement gathered momentum until independence was gained in 1833. William Knibb, a Baptist missionary in Jamaica, was one of those who worked tirelessly for emancipation. After emancipation many former slaves became small farmers, cultivating land organised and sponsored by Christian groups such as the Baptists. Yet, struggles over land remained a problem and, during the 19th and 20th centuries, labour unions struggled to get laws passed to protect workers. The Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and People's National Party (PNP) grew out of these workers organisations.

In 1962 Jamaica gained independence from Britain and since then power has alternated between the PNP and JLP. While elections have been violent, the country has managed to maintain relative political stability. However, economically and socially, Jamaica has been less stable. Jamaica's economic troubles have been blamed largely on borrowing from the International Monetary Fund, whose financing, it is perceived, has created a new, post-colonial economic slavery where the island ceded all control to the will of foreign economies. The ratio of debt to GDP is approximately 150 per cent. A growing crime rate is also hampering the economic growth. Some parts of the island have become poverty-stricken with garrison communities and political factions.

Current challenges

- ▶ In the last two decades crime has increased dramatically with unparalleled numbers of homicides and violent assaults, particularly in impoverished areas. The country has the third highest murder rate in the world with over 1,145 reported murders in 2004 alone.
- ▶ After Africa, the Caribbean has the second highest HIV/Aids numbers – its growth exacerbated by the booming sex industry.
- ▶ Jamaica is a major transshipment point for cocaine from South America to North America and Europe. Drug trafficking is a serious problem the government is attempting to address. Many of the drug smugglers come from areas of desperate poverty and are often single mothers in need of money. Sixty-five per cent of all drugs in the UK come from Jamaica.

BMS involvement in Jamaica

Although BMS no longer supports long-term mission personnel, a partnership remains with the Jamaica Baptist Union (JBU). The JBU is led by General Secretary Karl Johnson and supports small Baptist communities in the region, including pastoral support to Jamaican Christians in other parts of the region.

Background information

The land

Jamaica is the largest island (146 miles long and 51 miles wide) in the Caribbean after Cuba and Hispaniola and is mostly a limestone plateau with a mountain range running across the island from east to west, occupying one-third of the land area. The highest point is found in the famous Blue Mountains at over 7,000 feet. Jamaica's largest agricultural areas are a narrow plain along Jamaica's north coast and several larger plains near the south shore.

Agriculture accounts for seven per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP), employing 21 per cent of the population. Sugar cane is the main export crop with bananas coming a distant second. A major cash crop in Jamaica is ganja, the island's street name for marijuana. Ganja is grown throughout the island even though it is illegal.

Mining is one of Jamaica's major industries and employs around 6,000 people, accounting for a large percentage of the GDP.

Jamaica relies heavily on tourism – one in three employed workers are involved in tourism and services. The beautiful beaches to the north of the island are the focus of most of the tourism.

Religion

Jamaicans as a whole are a very religious people. The majority religion is Christianity (61 per cent) and the Christian Church has considerable standing and influence. There are smaller communities of Rastafarians (five per cent), and Muslims and Hindus.

Rastafarianism, which began in Jamaica, is seen as an indigenous Caribbean cultural product. Active in the composition and performance of reggae music Rastafarianism has spread worldwide through association with performers like Bob Marley.

Baptists are one of the largest denominational groups. The Jamaica Baptist Union was founded in 1849. Churches are organised on a circuit pattern with each pastor serving a number of churches. There are currently 314 Baptist churches in Jamaica with over 40,000 members.

Prayer points

- ▶ The Church is not as spiritually strong as its numeric strength implies. Pray for Christians to rediscover the redemption and love available in Christ; and for the Church to become effective and transformational in a society that is in desperate need of change.
- ▶ In 1992 the Jamaican government inherited one of the largest per capita debts in the world, and has started an economic programme to reduce inflation and unemployment. Pray for the government to implement economic policies which will benefit the impoverished population.
- ▶ Pray for the many people caught up in the sex industry and illicit drug smuggling, that they would discover a way out and find salvation and hope in Jesus.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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