



LONDON'S BIBLE BELT

Words Oliver Gordon

Photography Dominic Hawgood

Investigating the evangelical churches on his doorstep in south London, a writer goes undercover into a vivid and bizarre world of the faithful, the possessed and the exploitative.

I'm sitting at the back of the House of Praise listening to the internationally-renowned televangelist healer Benny Hinn tell me, and the rest of 500-strong congregation, that this could be our lucky day; when all our ailments are cured and our lives filled with prosperity and happiness forevermore. He summons the presence of the Lord and gives us all one last big communal healing, then hands over to the church's faithful pastors who attend to all those with specific gripes or illnesses.

Around a hundred or so of the congregation hurriedly make their way to the front. The room is bustling with energy; the air thick with excitement. I see the first few hopefuls receive – what ostensibly appears to be – a palm in the forehead from their respective pastors, before collapsing into the arms of those behind them in a fit of epileptic gyrations.

My view is soon drowned out by the thronging mass and I decide to get closer. I make a slow, bashful walk toward the front and into the queue of believers. We're all jammed in the aisle together and on all sides there's a tangible sense of hope and anticipation.

Suddenly, bodies begin pushing into me and the queue seems to be falling backwards. I get on my tiptoes to search for the cause of the commotion. Pastor Adeleke is steaming through the queue, scatter-gun healing all he encounters, bodies crumpling in his wake – a blood-thirsty rampage through sin and sickness; like Rambo, ploughing through a slew of hapless Vietcong. “You're healed! You're healed! You're healed!” And he's heading right for me.

I try to edge backwards through the crowd but I can't – there are at least 20 expectants crammed in behind me. Too late. Adeleke is already at the middle-aged Latino in front of me. He places his hand over the man's eyes; proclaiming into the mic: “You were blind but now you can see!” The man didn't appear to have any kind of visual impairment a moment ago. Never mind, he's in front of me now.

His hand is on my forehead. I close my eyes. My sense of guilt is telling me that I can't just feign a fit of celestial origin, but my fear of being ousted as a voyeuristic heathen tells me that I can't simply do nothing either.

“You are healed, my son!” I screw up my face, as if overcome by severe migraine, and then let God's detoxifying power wash the pain from my features. I open my eyes. Adeleke is observing me quizzically – I definitely underplayed it. No time to question. He pushes through to the lady behind me, blessed hand-mace at the ready.

I live in Camberwell, in the Southwark borough of South-East London. As with so many relatively impoverished parts of the capital, Camberwell also has an extremely vibrant community. You walk past people chatting to neighbours; through jocular conversations between shop proprietor and well-known customer; past the friendly hubbub spilling out of the innumerable barbers and nail-salons most evenings of the week. Never is this communitarian feeling more tangible than on a Sunday morning, when the local residents congregate outside their respective churches in their best to socialise warmly before and after a service.

Churches here are manifold and heavily frequented. According to the 2011 census, the population around Camberwell Green is 57% Christian, compared to a 48% average for the rest of capital. There are 51 churches within a one-mile radius of Camberwell Green alone. They follow multiple doctrines, but the majority adhere to **evangelical protestantism – a nebulous term describing the more dogmatic sects of a variety of protestant churches that believe in the sole authority of the literal bible, a salvation only through regeneration or rebirth, and a spiritually-transformed personal life.** The congregations of each are usually made up of one distinct demographic, the vast majority of African – particularly West African – origin (Southwark has the largest black African population in London), but also many from Latin America and the Caribbean. The churches play an active role within the community, with preachers on street corners, processions and celebrations on weekends, flyers and newsletters for services regularly distributed through letterboxes.

And despite the evident benefits for the neighbourhood's sense of togetherness, there is also a more fanatical side to the religious fervour. Much of the evangelical literature that comes through the door advertises special 'miracle' services that promise to cure all manner of illnesses, improve personal prosperity, and even to bring God's vengeance upon hated enemies.

It draws strong parallels to controversial Christian fanaticism that is playing an increasingly prominent role in the southern and mid-western states of the US – the so-called 'Bible Belt'. So often fascinated by that culture, the thought struck me looking at another swathe of ecclesiastical flyers on my mat one morning, that it was time to explore the unknown world of faith on my doorstep.

Power International Church

My first stop was a Sunday service at the Power International Church, 'a place of divine solution' according to the faded poster plastered over the battered old shop front on Camberwell Road. The nondescript entrance opened up into a long rectangular room, flamboyantly colourful.

I sauntered in to some very curious looks from the 25-strong congregation; most of African descent, many dressed in traditional kaftans. After Pastor Olla had led us in prayer, it was time for hymns. Over the next half an hour we sang 90s power ballads with every mention of 'her' exchanged for 'Jesus'.

But it was wonderful. Utterly soul-lifting. Full of love and joy. At the start, I was stiff and British, singing as if I was standing for the national anthem before an England friendly against San Marino. By the end, I was shouting and clapping with the loudest parishioners. Everyone was swept away in the euphoria – at one point it seemed as though Pastor Olla was having a breakdown; on her knees as she was, serenading the wall. It also seemed quite farcical: the band was completely off beat, and the choir – both of whom were having their own Beyoncé moments – struggled to carry a tune.

After a few readings, Olla's husband, Pastor Kay, pointedly enquired whether there was anyone new to the congregation. I reluctantly raised my hand. The next ten minutes were surreal. I was first 'welcomed' with hugs and handshakes by each member of the congregation. Then, under the duress of Kay's questioning, it transpired I had yet to be 'born again'. The result of that omission was everyone encircling me, hand-in-hand, and for five very long minutes praying for the deliverance of my soul.

The remaining half an hour of the service was dedicated to church admin: the title bag came round, birthdays were celebrated, soon-to-be travellers blessed, and Church summer outings debated on.

The next Sunday I found myself 20 metres further down the road at the All Nations Evangelical Church: another classroom-like space behind an innocuous Camberwell shop front. The décor was minimal and the 30-strong congregation mostly Nigerian.

The sermons mainly covered immigration: praying for a deported cousin, criticising Home Office immigration policy, offering advice to new arrivals. In one very poignant moment, Pastor Jagede proclaimed: “I just have to thank the Lord that I’m here, wearing this lovely dress, and not back in my village in Nigeria, fearing the moment Boko Haram arrive.”

Once again I was called out as a new arrival. Hugs and handshakes ensued, whilst everyone sang the Welcome Song – which was a lot like Happy Birthday, if every word were replaced by ‘Welcome’. Jagede sweetly announced by way of conclusion: “All are welcome, white or black. He’s white, but he can’t help that.”

Much of the service was dedicated to singing. It was wholly positive; the praising and thanking of God’s love and generosity. It would usually start with Jagede leading the congregation in a chant, repeated over and over. The band would then join in disjointedly, but eventually find the beat and the energetic atmosphere would lift higher and higher. All present would be carried away on a wave of fervour – dancing around the room, falling to their knees, beseeching the heavens. The whole experience was entrancing.

Emerging into the grey afternoon, I felt much as I had after the previous service; like I had witnessed something positive, optimistic and life-affirming. My overwhelming reaction was that these churches were a source for good: institutions that drew the local community together in a familial sense, providing a binding structure to give people in difficult circumstances a sense of purpose and solidarity. The only discernible difference was that the All Nations church seemed exclusively geared towards the local Nigerian community. So far so good.

The House of Praise

Next on the evangelical itinerary was the House of Praise, part of the Redeemed Christian Church of God: a Pentecostal church founded in Nigeria in the 50s that now has a footprint across five continents. If you live in the area, you would know this place by name. It’s impossible to miss: a huge, glitzy detached building that looks more like a Leicester Square theatre than a church.

My service was a special one: ‘A Night of Healing and Miracles’ with Pastor Adeleke and the aforementioned and renowned Benny Hinn. Arriving that Friday evening, the grandeur of the venue and the excitement of the crowd made it feel more like a concert than a church service.

A young, attractive choir set the mood with some uplifting hymns that each had the ring of a closing number to a Disney film: simple, heavily-repeated verses praising God with minor variations. As the tempo lifted, the congregation responded in kind: the man next to me was doing his best D’Angelo impression on backing vocals, his neighbour frantically jumping up and down hollering at full volume.

The energy in the room was euphoric. It struck me as a similar sensation to hearing a particularly stirring rendition of ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’ on a Champions League night at Anfield. I’m not from Liverpool, nor have I ever actually physically been to Anfield; a realisation that gave perspective to the new-found religious sensation growing in me. But that was to prove short-lived.

After a couple of hours singing and praising, a stylish American-Latina in her mid-thirties took to the stage, announcing she was Benny Hinn’s assistant. She informed us that ‘Benny’ was running late and then pumped up the crowd with an inspirational sermon that began with a denunciation of Hinn’s critics in the media: “It’s fine to be an evangelist, it’s fine to be a preacher, but when you’re a healer people think it’s some form of manipulation.”

“Benny has been travelling a lot recently, and it’s been taking its toll.” She explained how Hinn had been diagnosed with a heart condition but had subsequently found out that a member of his church was one of America’s top cardiovascular surgeons, who had since successfully operated on him. “Now, isn’t that just proof of God’s miracles?” asked the assistant. Rapturous applause. “But because he’s still recovering, Benny won’t be able

to be with us in person tonight.” Silence. The disappointment was palpable. “It’s fine though, he’s going to come to us via Skype!” That seemed to quell the disappointment somewhat, which was surprising given that the night’s ubiquitous advertising had made no mention of his absence.

Hinn’s assistant then went on a long pre-ambled about the type of people God chose to heal: more often than not it was the downtrodden ‘ethnics’ of a society. “Just look at Benny, he was a no-hoper migrant in Canada when God came for him.” It felt like a grasping sales pitch, stretched and contorted to fit the audience. Then came the kicker. She told her audience that to be healed, we had to give to God and “the more you give, the more you’ll get back. That’s why I’m giving £500 tonight, and you should all do the same. If you can, you should give more; but if you’re really struggling, £100 should suffice.” No reason given for what the money would be used for. Or why she was supposedly giving hefty donations to her own employer. I looked around for dissent or disbelief but the rest of the congregation seemed unperturbed.

Envelopes were passed out, and we were encouraged to fill and bring them to the front. They had tick boxes on the front for the donation size: £500, £1000, £5000, £10,000, more. All around me, people were delicately placing wads of cash into their envelopes and moving forward to the front with an uncontrollable air of hope. A large portion were women – usually older – and many were evidently sick or crutch-bound.

After trying and failing to reach him on Skype, Hinn eventually answered his assistant’s phone call to ecstatic applause. That was the highlight. He then spent 20 minutes discussing how he was feeling and detailing how his recovery was going – something like being on a call with a slightly senile granddad.

He then unceremoniously announced: “God is in the room with you, and he tells me he heals you all.” Which I thought was slightly anticlimactic but the rest of the congregation seemed exultant. There then followed a few numbers from Hinn’s own piano-playing Christian rock canon, which could only be described as like watching John Candy do a round of up-tempo Jesus-themed Randy Newman covers.

Hinn said his goodbyes and passed over the ‘power’ to the local pastors to carry out one-on-one healings. And so ensued my encounter with Pastor Adeleke. On the way back to my seat I passed Hinn’s assistant as she sardonically hissed at one of the pastors: “How about next time you find a technician who actually knows what he’s doing!”

Emotionally and physically drained, after four hours I decided to call it a night. But not before another round of over-zealous hugs from my now very-familiar neighbours. I came away feeling shocked and angry, witness to a violation. The early joy of the evening, powered by the beautiful love and hope of the congregation seemed utterly shattered by the manipulation of what seemed to me a self-anointed, apostolic con-man and his entourage of charlatan enablers. The game was contrived and psychologically orchestrated: pump up a crowd into such a state of hysteria that they confuse an adrenal rush with a brush with God, and then summarily rob them blind.

The Kingdom Church of Bishop Climate Ministries

My final church visit took me one Friday evening to what looked like a nondescript warehouse on a Camberwell backstreet. It wasn’t on my road but I felt it was the most familiar of the four churches because of its regular deliveries of the *Miracle Times* through my letterbox. The highlight of which is always the review of the month’s ‘Fire Service’. The basic premise of the service being that a believer turns up with a list of all their current enemies, which is then ceremonially burned in a big fire, with the promise that the Lord will carry out vengeance on their behalf. This particular review contained a collection of cheerful testimonials about the circumstances that befell respective enemies after their names were committed to the Fire.

The church was a large windowless room adorned with the usual red-velvet drapes and inspirational posters. The 100-strong congregation was mainly black, with some East Asian and Latinos, and one white woman. Some were obviously suffering illnesses, either physical or psychological; most carried the air of extreme poverty.

The choir kicked things off with the usual range of inspirational Disney hymns. But as the music entered full swing, the congregation reinvigorated as they sung, danced and clapped along in the spirit of Caribbean carnival. A select few would sporadically dance their way to the front and show off their idiosyncratic moves. It felt slightly like a nightclub: along with the dance moves, people showed off their wear – crocodile-print

latex leggings, a multi-coloured neon trilby, a fluorescent blue faux-fur gilet. It felt brilliant and absurd in equal measure, a touch of *The Mighty Boosh* to it all.

After an hour of praising, my inhibitions far in the rear-view mirror, Bishop Climate made a menacing entrance with a vast, burly bodyguard. He was flashing some heavy gold rings and watch, and was clad in an all-white dashiki. "Who wants to see their enemies burn in fire?!" he shouted into the mic. Ecstatic applause. And then came the sermon: what would end up being five hours of stream-of-consciousness spitballing that fell somewhere in between Jerry Springer's Final Word and a Dave Chappelle stand-up show.

And yet the audience adored every word.

Occasionally people would run to the front gleefully to receive a shove in the face from the Bishop. They fell to the floor, had a celestial fit for several minutes, and then quietly got up and made their way back to their seats – a logistical nightmare for the ushers, who would rush around trying to catch all the falling bodies.

Half the sermon consisted of the Bishop talking about himself; how far he'd come since he was a boy in East Africa, spending months in the 'bush' tending his goats. For the other half he played to the congregation's thirst for vengeance in their difficult life circumstances, describing how there existed a whole cadre of 'evil people' with the sole life purpose of holding us down. He had very practical examples: a boss who wouldn't promote someone out of jealousy, a Rachmanite landlord who kept raising the rent, a curtain-twitching neighbour who kept calling the police with unjustified noise complaints.

He would sporadically interrupt the sermon to lead the congregation in various chants about how these enemies would die in the Lord's flames: "They will die in fire! In fire! In fire!" shouted over and over again, like some demonic football chant – the audience singing, dancing, jumping, clapping along, as they merrily imagined their foes succumbing to Hell's fire pit. Climate even went on a furious tirade against other born-again Christians for their aversion to non-peaceful solutions.

At half past midnight, the Bishop called a select few to the front to provide testimonials against the enemies they would be submitting to the flames that evening: the most memorable was a heart-wrenching story from one distraught woman who explained that she had worked three jobs for 20 years to support her family back in Jamaica, only for her husband to leave her high and dry with nothing. Listening to her story, Bishop Climate looked on, sociopathically unmoved and cracking jokes throughout.

We then dutifully lined up to make our offerings to 'God's great fire' – a small bonfire in a rusty skip in the alley next to the church. When my turn came, the Bishop quietly told me: "You've really got to believe for it to happen" like it was some sort of disclaimer.

On the way back inside, I noticed the hallway was lined with glass cabinets displaying blessed items for sale. There was the 'Miracle Pack', a variety of prosperity-inducing divine toiletries; an array of anointed oils, all serving different purposes – one of which was to obtain a 'Not Guilty' verdict at a trial; and, my favourite – multipacks of blessed Ribena.

With everyone back inside, it was time for the second collection of the evening. As the old ladies around me busily stuffed their envelopes with notes, Bishop Climate gave the familiar spiel about 'the more you give, the more you get back' – with no indication as to what the money would be used for. He then asked ten people to come to the front who would be willing to give £200. A few people went up immediately (most of whom were ushers) but the congregation became conspicuously sheepish. Climate spent the next ten minutes manically jabbering into the mic about all the benefits God would bestow on the donors; bloody minded talking and talking until he filled his quota. Having just turned 1.30am, I decided it was time to leave.

Although essentially adhering to the tenets of Pentecostalism, like many, the Kingdom Church of Bishop Climate Ministries is its own beast; ruled by the autocratic dictate of its eponymous, messianic leader – seemingly a cross between radical Christianity and shamanic African voodoo. As with Hinn, Climate preys on society's weak and needy, manipulating their hope and desperation for his own benefit. His general demeanour made me question whether he even bought into the bullshit he peddled; or whether he just solipsistically saw himself as the ultimate self-made entrepreneur.

The good, the ugly

When passing judgement upon the role religion – and particularly a strain as absolutist as evangelicalism – plays within society, any opinion is innately driven by one factor: do you believe? I don't. And although my atheism far from extends to a Dawkinsian antipathy for the whole concept of religion, it does mean that I'm reason bound to approach the question of its function from a cold, sociological perspective rather than a spiritual one.

But even from that perspective, it strikes me that evangelicalism has, on the whole, a positive influence on Camberwell's diverse community; in some cases creating that community where otherwise there would be none. Evangelical churches like the All Nations Evangelical Church and the International Power Church – and many others of their type – form binding familial structures that bring together disparate local inhabitants around, for the most part, wholly benevolent principles: love God, love your neighbour, be thankful and joyous for your existence, be a good citizen. And that is particularly important in a place like Camberwell, where for many first-generation immigrant or below-the-poverty-line residents, security and structure couldn't be further from a daily reality.

However, when you combine fundamentalist faith with a strong desire to transcend difficult life circumstances, you open yourself up to manipulation and exploitation by hypnotic faith sharks like Benny Hinn and Bishop Climate. These sharks use crowd psychology to whip their congregations into such a state of frenzy that they will hand over inordinate sums of cash to win the promised divine-jackpot.

It is sickening to think that on any given evening, the sick, needy and frail are being mugged for all they've got, bludgeoned into submission with their own desperate yearning for a lucky break.