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Windrush and the lasting legacy of Black Christians in Britain

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Christians arriving on the Empire Windrush have made an enormous contribution to the life and faith of Britain since the 1940s, and yet, they were not warmly welcomed by their White brothers and sisters in Christ when they disembarked at Tilbury Docks. The story of Windrush is the story of modern British history. It is also the story of British church life over the past 78 years. It is foundational to the growth and development of contemporary African and Asian Christian stories, and is the fulcrum of modern Christianity in Britain.



A clash of cultures

A ravished Britain needed to rebuild after the Second World War. The clarion call and recruitment drive to the colonies – “Your Mother Country Needs You” – established several things. Firstly, that migration was an invitation from the British Government; secondly, the parental relationship was broadly accepted by both parties; and finally, the recruitment of skills and expertise were a priority in the rebuilding effort. This call reactivated Black participation in Britain. Although there had been a Black presence in England since the first century, the status of Black people rose and fell in the intervening periods. There had already been ample opportunities for White people of faith to encounter, embrace and extend friendship, particularly when over one million Africans and Caribbeans participated in the world wars, rubbing shoulders with British forces and sacrificing their lives for freedom. But when Caribbean people arrived at Tilbury Docks in 1948, with hope for the future and a willingness to contribute their skills and gifts, they were treated to a frosty reception.

It soon became evident that the fervent invitation and widespread marketing to help rebuild the health, transportation and other industries that lost their workers to war, was not accompanied by warm welcomes in local communities and churches. The migrants knew themselves to be British citizens, a fact they had been taught all their lives growing up in British colonies. However, this status was not fully understood or accepted by those living in Britain, where they were seen as mere economic migrants, foreigners bent on taking jobs away from locals. This came as a surprise to those who had been taught that the ‘Mother country’ was caring and well-resourced and would provide the opportunity to build a better life.

Most of the passengers on board Empire Windrush (the actual figure varies between 492 to 1,027 depending on the sources) were from Jamaica, then Bermuda, Trinidad, British Guiana, Grenada and British Honduras. What is not beyond doubt is that among the ranks were nurses, mechanics,



priests, accountants, engineers, dressmakers, plumbers, deckhands, Calypso singers and even boxers. Incredibly, at least 35 children under 10 years old disembarked at Tilbury. The youngest was Richard Carton, who was five days old and most likely had been born en route.

A primary push factor was the economic hardship in the Caribbean due to the terrible earthquakes that damaged livelihoods, and the yellow disease that made growing crops difficult after the war. Another factor was that those who had fought alongside their fellow Britons during the aforementioned war were desirous of a return to Blighty. Britain would later bring in the Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1962) and further reforms in 1968, which were designed to quell the popular narrative that Black people were stealing 'white' jobs. It removed the rights of Commonwealth citizens to live and work in Britain, and put a limit on migration to 8,500 across the Commonwealth. This Act, in effect, withdrew British citizenship from members of British colonies. It also meant that the foundations of much of what we see in Black-majority churches today were established within 14 short years.

Christian credentials

While some British parliamentarians were hostile to the idea of Black people settling in this country in significant numbers, other voices in Parliament saw Windrush arrivals in a positive light. They realised that one way to achieve acceptance and integration among the native British was to publicise their Christian credentials. On 8 September 1958, the Daily Mirror newspaper highlighted that 60 per cent of Jamaicans were Christians, and their churches in the Caribbean were packed.

While it was true that most Caribbean people were Christian – with 69 per cent attending historic denominations (Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational and Baptist) – by 1953, only four per cent of the migrants who had arrived in Britain were in these churches. The experiences of Carmel Jones and Io Smith – and many others like them – may go some way to explaining why this was the case.

In 1955, Carmel Jones, who had attended an Anglican church in St Elizabeth, Jamaica, before coming to the UK, was told not to return to St Paul's Church in Clapham, south London, after he attended a service there one Sunday. He said afterwards: "I was a boy of 17, when I encountered here one of the first of many acts of racial prejudice that subsequently occurred in my life."

Io Smith who, as a teenager in the 1950s, visited several churches in east London, recounted a similar experience: "The first place I visited was a church, but nobody said, 'Welcome.' Everybody stared at me as if I was some strange person from Mars or something. When the church finished, I didn't get a handshake. Nobody came out to me and said, 'Come again.'" In fact, she remembers how the ministers would hold onto the hands of White parishioners to avoid shaking hers.

Both Jones and Smith would go on to become pioneering Black-majority church leaders in the UK. Revd Jones MBE as the founder of New Assembly of Churches in 1980 – which brought together 12 denominations to work in prisons and offer employment skills and rehabilitation for Black young men leaving prisons. He also established the Pentecostal Credit Union, the largest Black-owned credit union, which offered savings and loans to the Black community who, at that time, were facing substantial barriers from banks and lenders. Without this credit union, many churches we see today would have been unable to purchase their buildings.

Revd Dr Io Smith MBE was leader of a New Testament Assembly congregation in Leyton, east London, and an effective ecumenist, community stalwart and advocate for social and racial justice.



Her work included establishing community clubs and homes for the elderly, as well as founding residential homes for homeless young Black people. Had the treatment of many Black Christians such as Jones and Smith been different, their gifts could have been developed for the benefit of the historic denominations.

Institutional racism

It was a poignant moment, a relief, and not before time, for many minority ethnic Anglicans when, in February 2020, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, declared to its General Synod that the Church of England was institutionally racist. Welby lamented: “I am almost beyond words. Personally, I am sorry and ashamed. I’m ashamed of our history, and I’m ashamed of our failure. I’m ashamed of our lack of witness to Christ. I’m ashamed of my lack of urgent voice to the Church...It’s shaming as well as shocking.” This contrition by the most senior leader of the Anglican Communion acknowledged and placed on record the experiences of Black Christians, including the Windrush Generation. It demonstrated that these negative experiences were real, unequivocal and ungodly. His acknowledgement paved the way for an apology to the Revd Carmel Jones on 25 October 2020 by Revd Canon Jonathan Boardman of St Paul’s Church. The 65 years it took for Jones to receive an apology further demonstrates the legacy and long tail of racism in the Church.

It is important to remember that this shame is not reserved solely for Anglicans; racism has been a chronic illness in all the historic denominations – and the testimonies and accounts of its impact were captured in Richard Reddie’s groundbreaking book, *Race for Justice* (Monarch, 2022). It also speaks to the tension of those Black Christians who stayed in the historic denominations and those who were signposted to “the church down the road”, which we now call Black-majority churches.

The birth of Black-majority churches

It’s important to point out that racism was not the sole reason for the birth or emergence of Black congregations in the UK. It can be argued that the historic denominations were unable, and at times, unwilling to meet the social, emotional, psychological, financial and spiritual needs of newly arrived Caribbean Christians. Equally, Christians who attended Pentecostal congregations in the Caribbean wanted to recreate what they had ‘back home’, and so, over time they established churches to meet this aspiration.

In 2023, two of the largest denominations emerging from Windrush marked their 70th Anniversary, the New Testament Church of God (NTCG), with 110 congregations and 60 cross-cultural churches, and the Church of God of Prophecy, with 83 congregations. Prior to the establishment of these churches in 1953, there was the Calvary Church of God in Christ (COGIC) in 1948; the Bethel United Church of Jesus Christ (Apostolic), under the leadership of Revd Sidney Dunn in 1955; and the New Testament Assembly (1961) under the leadership of Bishops Powell and Bernard.

What all these denominations have in common are their humble origins in this country. Often, their first services took place in the homes of the church leaders or the member with the largest house. Sundays would see sofas and other furniture removed from the front room as worshippers squeezed into the worship space to give praise to God for his goodness. Those who could not find a space in this room decamped to the hallway or the stairs. When these congregations outgrew homes, to meet the increasing requirements of worshippers, halls and community centres were



hired, often at great expense to the congregation. The need to provide a more holistic mission to worshippers resulted in the purchasing of their own buildings, and it was here that financial initiatives such as the Pentecostal Credit Union came to the fore.

A good example of this can be found in the life of Mary McLachlan and the aforementioned COGIC denomination. Mary, a 36-year-old dressmaker, travelled on the Empire Windrush with her 14-year-old daughter, Marjory, and her three sons: Edward (19), Godfrey (18) and Aston (8). Soon after arrival 'Mother' McLachlan, as she was known, started prayer meetings with friends in her family home. As the prayer meeting grew, it transitioned into a congregation and worshipped in a rented hall on Sussex Road, Brixton, south London. The congregation rapidly expanded. In 1952, her husband, Lawrence Oswald McLachlan, who joined the family later, was inducted as the first minister of COGIC. Bishop McLachlan became the national Bishop until the family returned to Jamaica in 1963. COGIC celebrated its 70th Anniversary in August 2018 under the leadership of Bishop Dr Alvin Blake. One of the hallmarks of COGIC is the incredible musicians and artists that it produced; it was the first Black choir to perform on BBC *Songs of Praise*.

The arrival of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), in particular, changed the landscape of Black Christian faith in Britain. With a mission to have a church within walking distance of every household, the church snowballed. In under 30 years, RCCG has become the most prominent Black-majority denomination with over 800 congregations across Britain and Ireland. Most of this growth was overseen by Pastor Agu Irukwu, its former head of the UK, and Pastor Modupe Afolabi, their executive administrator for the past 29 years. RCCG has been joined by various independent churches, including Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC), under the formidable Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo, which boasts the largest congregation in western Europe. In 2012 KICC purchased a 24-acre site in Kent, debt-free, for £5 million.

Building God's kingdom

It is no exaggeration that the presence of Black-majority churches reinvigorated church life in Britain. It needs to be noted that they are also bucking the trend of decline that is seen in most churches in this country. In the early 1970s and 80s, their presence poked and provoked the emergence of the charismatic movement. White Christians who yearned for a move of God – the fervency, the embrace of the Holy Spirit with signs and wonders – without becoming part of Black Pentecostalism, found homes in the charismatic and house church movements like Ichthus, Pioneer Networks, New Frontiers *et al.* It also provoked growth and mission in White-majority Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God and Elim Pentecostal Church, which still struggle with Black representation in their leadership despite an influx of Black Christians over the past 40 years.

We have seen the sons and daughters of the Windrush Generation leaving a lasting imprint on society and on the UK Church. The Revd Dr Joel Edwards CBE became the first Black leader of the Evangelical Alliance in 1997, and Angela Sarkis was the Chief Executive of the Church Urban Fund in 1996, and the YWCA in 2006. Revd Dr Calvin Samuel became the first Black Principal of London School of Theology in 2016, and in 2022, Bishop Mike Royal became the first Black general secretary of Churches Together in England, to name just a few.

Black Christians are here to stay. The task of building God's Kingdom is a joint enterprise. In the prayer of my friend and mentor, Joel Edwards, whom I visited and spoke to for the last time on Windrush Day 2021: "Lord make us one: But not all the same."