



# The Windrush generation

## History, memory and racial reconciliation



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The 'Windrush generation' became a popular term in the media and political discourse during the first half of the year. We heard sad and tragic stories of children of the Windrush generation losing their jobs and livelihoods, denied health and medical services, sent to detention centres to await deportation back to the Caribbean. In August at a pre-inquest hearing, there was the moving account of the mother whose 57-year-old son, Dexter Bristol, died of a heart attack after being caught up in the immigration scandal to prove his British citizenship. At the age of eight, he came to the UK in 1968, with his mother. Dexter's family believe that the loss of his job, being unable to prove his British citizenship and subsequently denied benefits and healthcare all contributed to his early death.

At the heart of government, the consequences of the shabby treatment of these British citizens were felt: the Prime Minister apologised for the fiasco and did a U-turn in deciding to see Commonwealth leaders from the Caribbean meeting in London for their biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) gathering in April; the Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, after apologising in the House of Commons and distancing herself from her department's 'hostile environment' policy for illegal immigrants, finally fell on her sword and resigned.

The effects of government policy are still being felt by Caribbean families and communities. But how should we view the Windrush generation, this post-war phenomenon that was the 'symbolic beginning of the modern phase in the relationship between Britain and the West Indies',<sup>1</sup> a generation

that changed the social, cultural and religious landscape of Britain and defining a new era in race relations?

### Alford Gardiner and the portrait of a pioneering generation

At the OXO Tower Gallery in London, there was an incredible photographic exhibition celebrating this pioneering Caribbean generation. Entitled 'Windrush: Portrait of a Generation', the exhibition by Jim Grover was described by *The Observer* as 'poignant and intimate', as well as 'moving and often beautiful'. As a child of the Windrush generation (I came to Britain in 1966 from Guyana), the exhibition brought back pleasant memories of familiar objects that most Caribbean families had in their homes.

I reflected nostalgically on the sepia photographs in the uniform frames and the inexpensive paintings depicting the Last Supper located in what was an over colourful and overcrowded 'front room' – for most of my generation growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, the 'front room' was always locked until special visitors came. I was looking for that beloved item that my parents (and I suspect other Caribbean parents) kept on top of the wardrobe: the 'grip'. This was the suitcase they came with from the Caribbean, with the intention that after three to five years they would have made enough money to return home. Alas, time passed and before they knew it they were retiring in a different Britain to the one they came to all those years ago.

At the exhibition, I was fortunate to meet Alford Gardiner, a passenger on the *Windrush*.

## NOTES

1. See D Olusoga, *Black and British: A forgotten history* (London: Macmillan, 2016), p. 493.
2. The front page of the *Church Times* for April 6, 1951 captures it well: 'Racial Discrimination Prevails in English Cities To-day – Coloured People's Problems.'
3. 'London's Churches Fail W. Indians', *Church Times*, 15 November 1963.
4. JD Aldred, *Respect: Understanding Caribbean British Christianity* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2005), p. vii.
5. I Smith, *An Ebony Cross* (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott Publication Ltd, 1989), p. 40.
6. R Beckford, *Jesus is Dread: Black Theology and Black Culture in Britain* (London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998), p. 11.
7. Founder of the West Indian Evangelical Alliance.
8. Leader of the First United Church of Jesus Christ, Apostolic.
9. O Lyseight, *Forward March: An Autobiography* (West Midlands: Birches Printers Ltd, 1995), pp. 34–6.
10. Matthew 5.13–16.
11. NT Wright, *God in Public: How the Bible Speaks Truth to Power Today* (London, SPCK: 2016), p. 166.
12. 2 Corinthians 5.15–17.

In conversation with Jim Grover (the curator of the exhibition) he reflects on his life in the UK in positive terms. Indeed, he refers to it as 'a brilliant life'. Alford was born in Jamaica on 27 January 1926, one of ten children. Like many other Jamaicans, he responded to the call for help from the 'Mother Country' during World War Two. At aged 17, he joined the RAF as a motor mechanic engineer and arrived in England in 1944. Alford completed his initial training in Staffordshire and was later posted to Moreton-in-Marsh in Gloucestershire. His 'Certificate of Discharge' states that his general character during service and on discharge was 'very good'; and that his work as a mechanic was 'above average'. Interestingly enough, before Alford went back to Jamaica after the war he completed a six-month engineering vocational course in Leeds.

He was back in Jamaica 'in time for Christmas' in December 1947. Like another RAF man from Jamaica, Sam King, Alford bought his £28 ticket for his place on the *SS Empire Windrush*. The ship was taken by the British Navy after the Germans surrendered. Sam King tells us in his autobiography, *Climbing Up The Rough Side of The Mountain*, that this former German troop ship was 'beautifully laid out, well organised' and some of the fixtures still bore German SS markings. The *SS Empire Windrush* left Jamaica on 24 May 1948 (Empire Day). It arrived at Tilbury on 22 June and its 492 predominantly Jamaican passengers disembarked for a new life in the 'Mother Country'.

## The politician's response

What would be the nature of their experience and struggles in the subsequent decades? How would they be welcomed by the host society and the churches? On the day the *Windrush* arrived, the *London Evening Standard* carried the headline 'Welcome Home'. This was a positive message to the newcomers. However, on that same day, 11 Labour MPs wrote to Prime Minister Atlee complaining about the 'discord and unhappiness' this wave of Caribbean immigrants would cause. This wave of anti-immigrant sentiments by the MPs was led JD Murray. The letter stated:

*Dear Prime Minister,  
May we bring to your notice the fact that several hundreds of West Indians have arrived in this country trusting that our Government will provide them with food, shelter, employment and social services, and enable them to become domiciled here ... Their success may encourage other British subjects to imitate their example and this country may become an open reception centre for immigrants not selected in respect to health, education, training, character, customs ... The British people fortunately enjoy a profound unity without uniformity in their way of life, and are blest by the absence of a colour racial problem. An influx of coloured people domiciled here is likely to impair the harmony, strength and cohesion of*

*our public and social life and to cause discord and unhappiness among all concerned.*

Even though two-thirds of the passengers on the *Windrush* were ex-servicemen who fought for Britain during World War Two, these Labour MPs felt that in post-war Britain people like these from the Caribbean were totally unsuited to settle in the 'Mother Country'. This type of prejudice and fear set the tone for the discrimination and struggles that the Caribbean community would subsequently face.

One can imagine how ex-servicemen like Sam King and Alford Gardiner would have felt to be told that they were unsuited by 'education, training, character' to settle in Britain; or that their presence would fracture the nation's harmony, cohesion and happiness. In short, the message to them was that their domicility in Britain portents 'colour racial problems', the likes of which have been absent in the country. Then there was the brutal murder of Kelso Cochrane in May 1959 by a group of white youths in Notting Hill Gate and Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech in April 1968.

## Dark 'strangers' in church and society

Fast forward a few decades from the Labour MPs' letter to some of the headlines, letters and articles in the archives of the *Church Times* newspaper and you see a post-Windrush Caribbean community discriminated against and struggling for acceptance in church and society. Behind many of these headlines, letters and comments there were people in church and society struggling to address 'the dark stranger' and the themes and challenges of integration, assimilation and racism in society. The headlines tell the stories of these experiences: 'Coloured Outcasts of Stepney' (9 June 1950); 'Stranger in our Midst' (18 March 1955); 'Expert Conference on the Integration of West Indians' (10 October 1958); 'Church Reaction to Restrictions on West Indians' (21 February 1958). However, there were also signs of hope, as in the 'Ministry of Reconciliation: Christian Britain Must Welcome Immigrants' (29 March 1968). Ten years after the *Windrush* pioneers settled in Britain, there is a moving story (some might call it banal and a little sentimental) by Alex Shore in the Children's Page of the *Church Times* on 10 October 1958. This piece of children's fiction does its bit for multiculturalism and the promotion of good race relations in the church. 'Black Boy and White' is the caption for the tale. The story is of a West Indian boy named Jonathan who is befriended by a white boy called Harry. The West Indian family recently arrived in the country, in a 'small village'. Harry and Jonathan happen to go to the same school and the local village church. When the latter falls ill, he is visited by his white friend. Jonathan is so pleased that his friend, 'a White boy', was coming to see him he 'felt happy and much better'. In fact, Jonathan enjoyed Harry's visit so much that he 'began to get well from that day! Let

me not spoil this endearing story of acceptance and friendship between two boys in an English village somewhere. They end up making and sharing cultural artefacts for the church bazar, which pleases the village vicar to such an extent that he arranges for the 'West Indian gifts' to be displayed on a 'separate stall'.

So what is the moral of this tale, the authorial intent? What is Alex Shore really trying to tell his audience about the state of race relations in church and society, or about interpersonal relations among black and white Christians, a decade after this new wave of Caribbean migrants arrived in Britain? The story ends thus: 'Jonathan was happy and so proud of his White friend. And Harry was pleased, for he had told his mother (when he heard of the way in which some Coloured people were being treated) that he would try to make this little West Indian boy happy in his country.'

Whether through personal friendships like that of Jonathan and Harry, or by church conferences, there were a range of proposals and suggestions as to how to help 'West Indians', according to Shore, feel 'happy in his country'.

## Discrimination, integration and sexual politics

The British Council of Churches organised a three-day conference in early April 1951 to consider racial discrimination and what was seen as the 'coloured people's problems'.<sup>2</sup> At one of the sessions chaired by the Bishop of Liverpool (Dr Martin), a number of issues and themes were raised about racial discrimination faced by Caribbean immigrants – for example, stories about the degrading signs in the windows saying 'No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs' when they tried to rent accommodation.<sup>3</sup> Speaking about his work with West Indians in Stepney, Father Neville Palmer recalled recalls the experience of one black man: 'A young West Indian I know went to a house to ask for a room. The woman who answered the door slammed it so hard in his face that the handle broke off. The Jamaican picked it up and handed it to her. Later he confessed to me that it was only the fact that he had an aged mother living in the West Indies that prevented him from taking his own life.'

It was not long in the proceedings before the sensitive topic of sexual politics as brought to the forefront. Through his contact with West Indians in Stepney, Father Palmer reported that one of them told him that 'the only women they have the chance to meet are outcasts from English society'. Whether to protect West Indians men or to keep them away from English women, the solution proposed by this churchman appeared practical even though it flew in the face of those wanting to restrict immigrants from the Caribbean. The solution to 'the problem' Father Plamer found difficulty in getting support for was 'to allow men who are married to bring their own wives to this country and to permit a carefully selected number of Coloured women to come to

England, with whom the unmarried might contract marriages and so enjoy a full family life, such as they would have in their own country.'

Not supporting the above suggestion to this pressing problem of the 'sex relationships among the Coloured people in the East End of London' would have, according to Father Palmer, amounted to 'making alliances with prostitutes and mentally defectives which can only result in a lower type of mentality in the next generation'.

There were two other matters worth noting from this important gathering. First, it was stated clearly by Mr AH Richardson from Liverpool that 'there is no such thing as a Coloured problem, rather there is a "White problem" brought about by the attitude we adopt towards Coloured people in the spheres of human employment and marriage relationships.' For him it was a question of whether all people, regardless of their pigmentation, were accepted as 'equals in the sight of God' and in the social and economic system in Britain. Secondly, the matter of evangelism and the 'tentative proposal' that 'Coloured people' should have their own churches. In respect of the former, the Bishop of Liverpool saw the presence of 'Coloured and colonial' people as a great opportunity for evangelism. In fact, for him this new home mission field was 'every bit as important as that of the missionaries who sail to overseas countries to convert Africans and West Indians.'

Concerning black people having their own churches and living in 'self-contained communities', there was a difference of opinion: Revd Michael Meredith (vicar of Christ Church, Moss Side, Manchester) supported the idea, having failed to integrate the two communities; Revd Robert Nelson (rector of Liverpool) was definitely against this kind of ecclesial separatism, arguing that the duty of the Church was to bring the two groups together into the worship and life of the community. Anything less than this is a 'compromise', it is directly 'contrary to the Pauline definition of the nature of the Church' and, equally important in the context of what's taking shape in South Africa, resulting in 'our own brand of apartheid'.

Indicating the persistence of racial discrimination, the paper reported on a study by Revd Clifford Hill for the Institute of Race Relations with the title *West Indian Migrants and the London Churches*.<sup>3</sup> The study claimed that the experience of most English churches for West Indians was a 'bitter pill' to swallow: 'It is like discovering that one's mother is a liar and a hypocrite.' Most damning of all was the view about the patronising attitudes of English Christians to black people and its impact on race relations. According to Hill, these views did 'more damage to the cause of racial integration than all the sneers and blasphemies of their English workmates in factory workshops'.

## Changing religious landscape

Despite this early negative atmosphere, the children of the Windrush generation have a great deal to be proud of. As a direct result of this generation, today there are a number of leading Caribbean Pentecostal churches in the UK as well as leaders in public life.

However, the growth and development of Caribbean Pentecostal churches were not without struggles, personal and institutional.

The perspectives of pioneers like Io Smith and Caribbean theologians such as Robert Beckford and Joe Aldred give us a critical insight into the experience of this community's encounter with British society. Aldred suggests that Caribbean Christians have had to endure 'a low level of acceptance and understanding and, conversely, a high level of rejection and misunderstanding from the host Christian and secular society'.<sup>4</sup>

Although not all Caribbean Christians would have encountered this, Io Smith recalls: 'The first place I visited was a church, but nobody said, "Welcome." We felt a sense of rejection straight away ... Another member told me: "I think the church down the road want black people." ... I was looking for love, warmth and encouragement. I believed the first place I would find that was in the Church, but it wasn't there.'<sup>5</sup>

Beckford signals a note of socio-historical honesty and experiential authenticity in saying: 'English churches were at best paternal and at worst racist in their response to the Black settlers.'<sup>6</sup>

However, to see the development of Caribbean churches simply through the prism of racism would be to offer a mono-causal explanation. Indeed, leaders like Philip Mohabir<sup>7</sup> and Bishop Dunn<sup>8</sup> and others came to the UK as missionaries.

As a leading Caribbean church in the UK, the New Testament Church of God has a remarkable history. It was started by its pioneering Bishop and first General Overseer, Dr Oliver A Lyseight, in 1953. In a similar way, he recalls the early struggles for acceptance in the 'Motherland' when Caribbean Christians were 'despised and made to feel unwelcomed by some of the main-line churches'. However, he testifies to 'a better way to overcome these trials, and that was through the power of God'.<sup>9</sup>

The ongoing effects of the Windrush scandal, and a brief look back at some of the early history and experience should challenge all of us to examine how we respond to the 'stranger' – the refugee, the asylum seeker, the poor and marginalized. Equally important, we need to examine how we deal with race, preferment and privilege in how we select and mentor people for leadership and ministry in churches. There are still too many churches where African and Caribbean people feel that they are treated as second-class citizens when it comes to

leadership. Issues of race, gender and power still fracture church and society; and there is a desperate need for Christians to model radical inclusion and acceptance. The metaphor of 'salt and light'<sup>10</sup> has profound personal, social and political implications for all of us. Believing that people are created in the image of God places a duty of care on us for people of all backgrounds: it means challenging structures and systems of injustice that militate against the dignity of the individual, as well as being co-workers with Christ in engendering human flourishing. In a society, and church, where there are manifest injustices, where there are divisions, cleavages and privileging of access to power and preferment based on race, culture and gender we need individuals who will take a prophetic stand against ideas and practices that mar the image of God in the individual. 'Those who are hungry and thirsty for God's justice will be analysing government policy and legal rulings and speaking up on behalf of those on the bottom of the pile.'<sup>11</sup> There is something here to be said for Christian activism and faith-based political witness in the public square.

Equally, we need a new biblical and theological understanding of what it means to be agents of 'reconciliation' in a fractured world. Reconciliation is a dual process, it is both human and divine: it involves God reconciling us to himself in Christ, but it also involves us being reconciled to each other after a period of hostility and conflict.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

On 22 June, the nation marked the 70th Anniversary of the arrival of the *SS Empire Windrush* at Tilbury Docks with a service at Westminster Abbey. The preacher for the occasion was Revd Joel Edwards, a child of the Windrush generation from Jamaica. It is important that the achievements of the Windrush generation and their children do not get lost in the fast-moving media and the political noise of the 'unintended consequences' of the hostile environment encountered by Caribbean people who came to Britain between 1948 and 1971. As we consider aspects of the history and experiences of this generation there are crucial lessons for our shared future about how we deal with race, social cohesion and reconciliation.

Racism and discrimination were significant factors in the history and experience of the Windrush generation. While we have come a long way since then, this community still suffers from discrimination. The Church can, and should be, the place where all people feel welcome and accepted. There is much work to be done in making our churches more inclusive and our society more cohesive. Of course, our strategies and vision will always be provisional and limited, but we can do better as Jesus' followers. To this end, there is an encouraging line in the *Didache* that says: 'If you can shoulder the Lord's yoke in its entirety, then you will be perfect; but if that is too much for you, do as much as you can.'