Birmingham Baptist Churches Exploring their Black History Project

Leader's Story: Hazel Nunes 'Called to care'

Authors: Gale Richards with Daniella Diswemi, and Samuella Diswemi.

Hazel Nunes (née Tracy) was born and raised in St Ann, Jamaica. She grew up in a Christian home where she had limited freedom as a girl, and so did not really travel in Jamaica. Her dad was a farmer and her mum a housewife. Hazel worshipped at a Baptist church in Jamaica where her dad was a deacon, and she was baptised at the age of 13. Hazel trained as a dressmaker before she came to Birmingham, England, aged 19, in 1960. She initially worked in a Birmingham factory that produced light bulbs, before finding work like many women from the 'West Indies', as a nurse in the health service.

For Hazel, coming to England made sense because she saw herself as British (Jamaica was a British colony until 1962), and there were few job opportunities in Jamaica. When Hazel first arrived in England, she found it difficult to find housing. Reflecting on her experiences, she feels the country should have provided housing (e.g. hostels) for all these people that were encouraged to come from the 'West Indies' to work. Fortunately, she was able to find support through family and friends.

Hazel had an uncle living in Birmingham who was waiting for his wife to come over to England. He also worked nights. That meant they could

share a room, as she could sleep in the bed at night, and he could sleep in the bed during the day. Recalling this early experience, she recalls many white English people were not willing to rent Black people rooms in their houses. But thankfully there were a number of houses owned by people from India, and they were willing to offer rooms for rent to 'West Indians'.[1]

Hazel first lived in Ladywood, then she moved to the Alum Rock/Saltley area of the city. She married Jeff Nunes in 1963, and they moved to the Moseley/Balsall Heath area of the city. They eventually moved to the Highgate area, where they have remained to this day. Hazel recalls experiencing the 'colour bar' the first time she attended a church in England, and was told not to come back, as some in the church feared they would lose their white members if they welcomed Black people into the church. She had attended a Baptist church in Jamaica that was led by a white minister. So, she was shocked when she came to England and found that she was not welcomed in a church.

Reflecting on her experiences of racism, Hazel believes it was her Christian faith that really helped her to manage her temper. Remembering words of scripture 'to be slow to anger' (James 1:19–20) and working on rebuilding her confidence, she eventually went to another church led by a white minister. In 1975, Hazel started regularly worshipping at Highgate Baptist Church, and all six of her children attended the Sunday School. She recalls meeting Sister Betty [Bessie] who was the last of a number of white women deaconesses who in succession from 1901 had led the church – Sister Ada 1901-1905, Sister Florence 1906-1921, Sister Emmie

[1]At the time the term 'West Indian' was a term commonly used to describe people from the Caribbean.

1921-1945, Sister Doris Rippin 1946-1958, Sister Florence Hill 1958-1961, and Sister Bessie Selwood, from 1961 until her retirement in 1974.

Hazel remembers that many (but not all) of the members of Highgate Baptist Church were welcoming when she arrived. However, that warm welcome she received from many in the congregation, for which she gives thanks to God, enabled her to focus on worshipping God and not to focus on the prejudices of others.

Hazel went on to be very involved in the life of the church including becoming a deacon. She welcomed and nurtured children who came to the church and liked to think of them as her children. She also enjoyed teaching in the children's Sunday School groups. Additionally, she served communion, visited people when they were sick, visited and prayed for people who had applied (or were thinking about applying) to become church members, and she helped to do whatever needed to be done in the life of the church. This at times included giving a talk when the church had informal Thursday communion services. She believes that singing has always helped her and others grow spiritually (she has been singing since the age of eight, when she became a Christian in Jamaica), so in the days Highgate Baptist Church had a choir, she was one of its members.

Some of the pastoral skills that Hazel has drawn upon in caring for people in the church have come from her experiences of being a nurse. She retired from the health service at the age of 55, and after about twenty-five years of service, because her health was deteriorating. She had specialised in working with people with dementia, and while it was demanding work, and she found it challenging, she believed God had

called her to do this work. She was supported from working alongside a fellow Black Caribbean nurse there, Mrs Yvonne John, and together they navigated many of the challenges that came their way. In fact, it was Hazel that recommended Highgate Baptist Church to Yvonne, who in turn also found a home at the church, for many years, too.

When she arrived in England, Hazel planned to return to Jamaica after five years, but she ended up making Birmingham her home. She travels back to Jamaica to visit from time to time. Whilst she believes that racism still exists in England, she has remained open to others and refuses to let the prejudices of others make her a bitter person. She remains mindful and thankful for the good things that she has been blessed with, which is a lesson her parents taught her many years ago as a child, and one that she is still guided by to this day.

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References

‘Birmingham Baptist Churches Exploring their Black History’ oral history interview with Hazel Nunes, 18 January 2026, conducted by Gale Richards with Danielle Diswemi and Samuella Diswemi.

‘Celebrating Highgate Project’ Hazel Nunes and Jeff Nunes oral history interview 22 February 2012, conducted by Andrew Green.

‘Celebrating Highgate Project’ Yvonne John oral history interview 23 February 2012, conducted by Andrew Green.