Birmingham Baptist Churches Exploring their Black History Project

Leader's Story: Jeff Nunes 'A Handyman'

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

Jeff Nunes was born and raised in Manchester, Jamaica. His dad was a farmer and carpenter. He grew up with the same mindset of being a tradesperson, farmer, cabinet maker, and so gained those skills whilst he was still in Jamaica. He used those skills when he was still in Jamaica, to build houses for people, and made caskets (also known as coffins) for burials, free of charge. In Jamaica at that time, making a casket was a community event, where people came together to eat and drink, as they remembered the person who had died.

Jeff arrived in England in 1961, and spent a brief period in Bristol, before travelling on to Birmingham. He married Hazel in 1963. She had come over from Jamaica a year before him. They moved to the Moseley/Balsall Heath area of the city and then eventually to Highgate, where they have remained to this day.

Jeff experienced the 'colour bar' when he went to places enquiring if they had any available jobs, and he was told the vacancies had been filled, but this was not true. Rather, the employers were saving the job for a white person. Jeff did not personally experience racism in a church because initially, when he came to England, he was not a regular churchgoer (his

parents worshipped at an Anglican church in Jamaica). When he came to England, the stories he had heard of Black people not being welcomed put him off attending.

Jeff recalls that 'West Indian'[1] people treated white ministers in Jamaica really well. So, it made the treatment of Black people by the churches in England shocking to him. Jeff recalls his family raising him to understand that no matter where you go in the world show manners towards people, and try and help people (even if they throw it back in your face), that will help you survive. He also arrived with the saying he had learnt in childhood that 'when in Rome do as the Romans do', so he had not expected things to be easy in England, and he was ready to adapt as needed, in order to survive.

Jeff remembered a story he heard of a woman at the Accident Hospital in Birmingham being sacked for polishing the floor (as it was seen as dangerous to have a polished floor). It seems to him that she was 'before her time' as now hospitals buff floors! Jeff himself got a job at the Gas Works in Saltley – delivering coal to schools and homes. He worked there for four years. Then he got a job at Lucas, a company that made car parts, and he was interested in learning about how the machines worked there. He worked there for fourteen years, and believes his hearing was damaged by the noise there. Then he worked at Cadbury's factory where he made and wrapped chocolate. He loved it there and stayed there until his retirement. He describes it as the best place he worked and he found the people there to be friendly.

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

Jeff acknowledges that he had to navigate some challenges at work as a Black man. He describes it as having to be willing to work his way up, knowing that people particularly scrutinise what you do and how you do it. For him, it was ‘like turning the other cheek’, just as Jesus taught his disciples to do (Matthew 5:39).

He arrived at Highgate Baptist Church in the 1970s. He went on to be a deacon, often putting his tradesperson knowledge and skills to good use, in helping the church keep the premises in good order, for worship services and its vitally important wider community work.

September 2026

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References

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

‘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.