

Reflection from a delegate to General Assembly 2022

What follows is a reflection from one of the delegates for whom the closing session and service sparked off memories which are relayed through story:

“A minister whom I knew well once told a story of how he (and doubtless other ministers of his generation) had failed totally to react positively to the arrival of people from the Caribbean. He had been ordained in the mid 50’s and inducted to a church in London and a year or so after his induction, he was approached by a young Caribbean couple. They were from a Congregationalist background and wished to be married. The minister met with the couple, who were beginning to become part of the church fellowship, and happily agreed to do the wedding. The date and time were set.

When the day arrived, all seemed well – until the set time for the wedding started to draw near. No-one had come to the wedding! At the time when the wedding was due to start, the only two people in the building were the minister and organist, who had been playing for twenty minutes or so in the assumption that people were coming into the building. When the wedding party finally arrived, getting on for an hour after the set time, the minister was angry. He conducted the wedding, but only after telling the couple and their families in no uncertain terms that this sort of behavior was unacceptable.

He never saw the couple, or any of their family, again.

Was he racist? No, he was not a racist. The problem was that nothing in his training, or his experience up to that moment, had prepared him for such a culturally different approach to time-keeping. In retrospect, and in the light of a greater understanding of Caribbean culture, he deeply regretted what he had said to the couple, and realised that he had been the cause of immense hurt to those who had come to Britain expecting that the ‘mother’ of Churches would welcome them.

Sadly, the minister died a few years ago. He would have been so delighted to know that many of Caribbean descent were now in places of leadership within the United Reformed Church; he would have rejoiced at the election of Tessa Henry-Robinson as the new Moderator-Elect of General Assembly 2023/4; he would have been deeply moved by Karen Campbell’s contributions and of her sermon at Fiona’s Induction. Sixty-five years have passed since that sad day when a young couple felt rejected by ‘their’ church. But perhaps, in the company of the saints, that minister may now lay aside that terrible feeling of guilt which stayed with him all his life.