



## 6 NIGERIAN STORY

story collected in 2004

The Story of Alfred Abolarin, Ethnic Minority Health Development worker with South Belfast Highway to Health project as well as chairperson of the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM).

Alfred, how did you come to be living in Belfast?

I am originally from Nigeria and I came to Belfast six years ago because my family reside and work here. They are British or English.

How have you found Northern Ireland?

Northern Ireland is a beautiful country, unfortunately, there are people who do not realise how blessed and fortunate they are; living in such a wonderful part of the world. My experience of Northern Ireland has been positive but not without a taste of bitterness, most people are friendly and quite hospitable, a few

minorities are ignorant or at least pretend to be. I find that I am able to make friends and relate with most people regardless of age, gender or community affiliation. My experience of Northern Ireland has been OK, most people are friendly, a few are not but I find that I am able to make friends at an early stage.

There have been times when I have been called names and my own car was attacked in Belfast whilst it was parked outside my own home. However, I have been able to build up good relationships and friendships and I don't feel isolated as compared to my first days and months in Northern Ireland. I feel able to integrate well. Working directly with individuals from the minority ethnic communities has given me the opportunity to understand how other people feel and why they feel the way they do. Some of these experiences are not so positive. There have been times when I have been

called names and my car vandalised. Some people find it hard to embrace 'change' or 'difference'.

You speak English very well, has this helped you to integrate better? In Nigeria, English is the formal / official language even though there are various dialects and tribal languages. My own parents lived in London in the early seventies, therefore I have had, what I will call an international upbringing which has helped gave me an understanding and exposure to different cultures. Even when during my time in Nigeria, I had friends in Nigeria who were 'international'. I guess living in an urban culture gives you an international flavour of life.

I suppose being able to communicate and be understood enhances the possibility of building relationships. Language is a powerful tool, so I will say yes, being able to speak English has certainly helped me to integrate

whilst maintaining my individuality as an African or as a Nigerian.

What can we do to help people coming into our country?

Most people coming in from different countries have different needs, goals and objectives. In my own opinion, the first thing I am sure most people desire is a safe place where they can lay their head and just need to be treated humanely. Most foreigners need support, listened to and then to give them advice, friendships, and an understanding and support or options of the Northern Irish system and culture. I will think Christians coming into this country will feel where they will and should be able to get help and support from the church, if everything else fails. I worship at the Ulster Temple on the Ravenhill Road. The church has its doors opened wide, always willing and ready to help anyone regardless of ethnicity. This Ravenhill Road and this is a warm place which is very similar to my church experience of church family back home. Many people are just looking for places to have fellowship, where they won't be judged, harassed or treated sub-humanly.

I believe education is the key. We all have responsibilities, indigenous Northern Irish folks and foreigners alike. We all have to learn. It is important to train up the youth to create a greater awareness about each others' different cultures, respect one another and value diversity. It is crucial and important to train up the younger generation so that the future will bring with it a society that is free from prejudice, hate, discrimination and injustice. As a qualified anti-racism, equality and diversity trainer, I have seen the positives in challenging attitudes through anti-racism training and cultural awareness. I feel minority ethnic individuals or foreigners should be more pro-active in trying to integrate and understand the society which they have chosen to

make their own. On the other hand, I feel the wider community have got to come to terms with the fact that a lot of 'foreigners' are born here and this is home to them. They are Afro-Northern Irish, Northern Irish Asians, or whatever name they choose to call themselves.

From a Christian perspective, I think genuine love is the key, the Bible says, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' I think this is the fundamental key to your question. So in answer to your question, I will say you can help people coming into this country by showing them genuine love. Loving them as you love yourselves. I think it is important that Northern Irish people love themselves first, and then perhaps this love can be genuinely extended to 'foreigners' coming here, ... a genuine love that will cut across communities, sectarianism, racism and other related intolerance.

Alfred continues to live and work in Northern Ireland.