



**World Church Sunday: 28<sup>th</sup> January 2024**

**Readings: *Luke 10, 25-37; Acts 16, 6-10***

***Epiphany IV***

**Legacies of Slavery. With Professor David Reynolds, after the reading of Acts 16 – ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us’.**

Like Nigel, I want to share with you a journey – but very different in character. A journey mostly of the mind and the imagination, yet with profound practical consequences. As some of you may know, since the summer of 2021 I’ve been the Convenor of the URC’s Legacies of Slavery group – tasked with helping the church reflect on the enduring impact of enslavement and the slave trade on our country and its people, especially in reinforcing racist attitudes and practices. It wasn’t a post I asked for. I got nobbled by John Bradbury just after he left here to become the URC’s General Secretary. Eventually, and with trepidation, I agreed – because of a still small voice that, irritatingly, would not go away. And it proved the start of a journey that has stretched my mind as a historian, touched my heart as a human being and deepened my Christian faith.

Of course, some politicians would dismiss what I’ve just said as deluded wokery. But we know that over the last few years major institutions across the country have been facing up to the legacies of slavery – institutions from the Crown, the Anglican Church and the Bank of England downwards and outwards. This is also true of Cambridge University and most of its colleges. Some of you may have seen the exhibit at the Fitzwilliam Museum last autumn entitled *Black Atlantic* – putting black faces back into the telling of Atlantic history in the days of Britain’s emergence as a sea power and a slave power. The Museum is based on the art collection given to the 7th Viscount Fitzwilliam in the 18th century by his slave-owning Dutch grandfather and the Viscount, in his will, bequeathed it to the University with a substantial endowment. In truth, the Fitzwilliam Museum – a place of beauty and wonder – is a local legacy of slavery.

Our national narrative takes pride in Britain’s role in ending the slave trade in 1807 and abolishing the institution of slavery in 1833. And rightly so. Abolitionists such as William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson, still memorialised in Cambridge street names, played a leading role in channelling mass public pressure on Parliament – especially from our non-conformist forebears and from Anglican Evangelicals. But we are less ready to remember that, before abolition, this country had made immense profits from the slave trade and slave plantations. These profits from commodities such as sugar, tobacco and coffee helped make Britain “great” in the age of empire and transformed the British diet, often in addictive ways.

Nor is it often remembered that abolition was approved in the 1830s by vested interests in Parliament only because the slaveowners would be compensated for the loss of “their property” – meaning the forced labour of enslaved human beings. Given the wealth of this country in the 1830s, the compensation bill was simply added to the

national debt and it wasn't paid off till 2015. Former slaves and their descendants received no compensation.

Here's where I shift from history to feelings: from the head to the heart. As part of the Legacies of Slavery work for the URC, our Task Group has held regular Zoom meetings.

It's a small group and often I've been the only white person on the call – listening more than talking. That has been a deeply moving experience. Slowly I began to understand why my fellow Christians, born and raised in Britain, needed to hear words of Apology. They cannot forget that they are the descendants of black people who were enslaved by white people.

Nor can they ignore the many signs in our contemporary culture that being black is still a source of discrimination and abuse – including men and women who are ordained ministers in the URC.

Hearing some of their pained and painful stories helped me grasp why it so important to say "Sorry". Not because I, or any of us here today, was responsible for slave-trading. But because I need to say – as one does to someone who has been bereaved or has suffered grave illness – those little words, those BIG little words . . . "I'm sorry".

In the summer of 2022, the URC's General Assembly said "We're sorry". And it coupled that Apology with a commitment to what we call "Repairing Justice." Over the last 18 months, the Legacies of Slavery Task Group has been working to prepare a few practical projects – in the UK and abroad. On World Church Sunday let me tell you about the global project that is taking shape.

Here we have found a partner in a group of fellow Christians from Jamaica, led by Rev. Dr Gordon Cowans. We met them last summer, when they were visiting London, and hit it off immediately. And we also shared with them in the inspirational "Windrush 75" event at Southwark Cathedral. That service of worship gave thanks for the contributions made by the "Windrush Generation" of migrants from the Caribbean and their British-born descendants to our country's economy, society and culture since the Second World War. Here was a positive and uplifting narrative to set against the dark legacies of slavery.

Most of the group that Gordon led belong to the United Church of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands: like the URC the product of a union between Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Churches of Christ. They, too, are engaged in a project of Apology and Reparations. That may surprise you. But the United Church of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands owns land bequeathed to them in the 18th and 19th centuries by white slaveowners, many of whom were pious Christians according to their understanding of the Gospel.

Gordon is one of the leading figures in CRAF: the Churches' Reparations and Action Forum.



## Churches' Reparations Action Forum (Jamaica)

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They have developed a 7-point plan which detailed and wide-ranging – addressing issues such as identity and education, property and agriculture. As we took the measure of what they wanted to do and appreciated the energy and integrity of these fellow Christians, we realized that these were partners with whom we could – and should – work. But not by saying “OK, this is what **WE** are going to do” – as if Britannia still ruled the waves and waived the rules. Instead, to adapt the language of the passage from Acts 16, we are not saying “we’re coming to Macedonia and here’s our plan.” We’re saying: “We are ready to share in the work you wish to do. How can we help?”

Gordon has had a diverse career so far. Trained in education and economics, he has played a leading role in the leadership of Jamaica’s schools. And as an ordained minister, he served for a few years moderator of the United Church of Jamaica and the Cayman Islands and I talked a few days ago, I asked if he would introduce himself to you.

In a recent Zoom call, I asked him to tell us a bit more about the fifth of CRAF’s 7-point plan: about property ownership, wealth creation and the establishment of what they call “New Free Villages”<sup>1</sup>. Because this is where we hope that the URC, with financial support from other bodies, can make a real contribution. I asked Gordon to explain . . .

I'm Dr Gordon Collins, an ordained minister of the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands. My training is in education and in economics. I have worked in the last four decades or so in areas of education, leading some of the church’s schools. I have been fortunate to be the Moderator are of the United Church a couple of years ago, for two years

*In conversation with David Reynolds, about Free Villages*

Gordon: I want to honour our ancestors, including many of the Christians who helped to establish early Free Villages in the 19th century, at the time of emancipation. Former enslaved people were able to become landholders, and those villages still exist in Jamaica, even if, unfortunately, not appropriately marked in many places. The current generation may not understand that these families began to become holders of land essentially because of the efforts that were made through those Free Villages, at the time when the state was not reimbursing formerly enslaved persons in any way. At the time of emancipation, payments - and they were substantial - came into the hands of former holders of property in a system of Chattel Slavery, and so the vast majority of the Jamaican population would have been landless at emancipation.

I think that is part of the reality. Today 20-30% of the Jamaican population are currently considered to be ‘squatters’ - that is, illegal occupiers of whatever for them is their housing solution. This is a particularly devastating thought to me, but it is part of the truth. If we were able to respond in some way to these needs, not only would we in our own denominations make a difference, but also perhaps encourage other holders of large parcels of land - which includes the state. In time perhaps we could

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<sup>1</sup> [Free Villages in Jamaica – Jamaica Information Service \(jis.gov.jm\)](https://jis.gov.jm)

