

The URC's Legacies of (transatlantic) Slavery Journey

Here are some FAQs relating to the work of the URC's Legacies of Slavery (LoS) Task Group based on feedback received to date:

1. Slavery was not just a European or British practice. It was a thriving business across Africa.

Yes, but our concern is with the transatlantic slave trade – in which millions of Africans were transported to the Caribbean and the American colonies in British-owned ships as forced labour for the immensely profitable crops of sugar, tobacco and cotton. And when slavery was abolished in Britain in 1833, the compensation paid to former slave-owners helped fuel Britain's industrial revolution, especially the railway boom of the 1840s.

2. The slave trade was abolished in 1807. Slavery was banned from the British Empire in 1833. So, none of this is anything to do with us in the twenty-first century.

The concern of the Task Group is with the **legacies** of slavery, right up to our own day and age: the stigma suffered by those whose ancestors were slaves, and the enduring effect of racist attitudes on our present society. That's why we call for Confession as well as Apology.

3. What about those of our Church forebears who were pro-abolition – where is their story reflected in the URC's Legacies work?

The LoS task group affirms the efforts of those in the Church who worked towards the dismantling of transatlantic slavery and the liberation of enslaved people – yet, despite their efforts, transatlantic slavery continued for a very long time. And whilst transatlantic slavery was eventually brought to an end, the legacies of racial hierarchy, inequality, and persistently racist structures continue. The focus of the task group's papers has been to throw light on the issues which still need to be addressed. We regard this work as continuing in the footsteps of those in our Church heritage who were also concerned with justice for the enslaved Black people.

4. There's all this talk about 'white privilege'. Many white people are poor, jobless, ill, and badly housed. They certainly don't feel privileged.

Many of the problems you mention are indeed the experience of white people. Yet Black and ethnic minority people also experience prejudice, abuse and discrimination every day simply because they aren't white – not least URC ministers, in the street and even among their congregations. That was the specific issue our task group was asked to address.

But the final point in our proposed confession commits us to 'continue working to promote racial justice as part of our Christian commitment to justice for all.'

5. Why is there a focus on ‘Black Lives Matter’ rather than upholding the position that ‘All Lives Matter?’

The LoS task group absolutely believes that ‘All Lives Matter’. That said, we recognise we live in a world, a society and a Church which do not reflect this truth. There is no level playing field. Opportunities for Black and ethnic minority people are not the same as those afforded to white people. The struggles faced by Black and ethnic minority people aren’t equally faced by their white counterparts. Only when these inequalities have been addressed – when our day-to-day living demonstrates that Black lives really *do* matter, and matter *equally* as much as white lives – only then will it become meaningful to say that ‘All Lives Matter’.

6. Why are Black people being asked to apologise for what has been done to them?

What’s proposed is an apology and confession by the URC as an institution, committing itself to some form of restorative justice as part of becoming an anti-racist church, in which white members need to learn and understand more of the experience of our Black and ethnic minority members.

7. In legal terms, does apology entail culpability?

The rationale for offering an apology is laid out in the task groups’ original report – Healing: Hope in Action (2019) and in the Consultation Overview Document (2021). We do not believe the issue of culpability should deter the URC from doing what we believe to be right. That said, the task group will look further into the question of culpability.

8. What is envisaged as ‘reparations’ or ‘compensation’?

Tentatively, we are using the phrase ‘repairing justice’ because that suggests some kind of attempt to make amends for past injustice, without implying a direct payback (which is impossible). As to the content of this repairing justice, that is ‘work in progress’.

We’re encouraging communities in the UK to identify projects that address racism in their localities. We’re also exploring the issue with partner churches in Africa and the Caribbean still scarred by the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade. Where we go in the future is part of the ‘journey’ that we are calling on the URC to begin now – a journey towards becoming an anti-racist church.

9. Is any work being done to address the underrepresentation of Black and ethnic minority people in senior positions in the URC?

A resolution passed in November 2020 committed the URC to a journey from 'not racist' to actively 'anti-racist', including a remit to examine and address issues in every aspect of the Church's life. In July 2021, General Assembly adopted a further resolution asking the Equalities Committee to carry out work exploring the relative absence of Black and ethnic minority people from Assembly Appointed positions, and to suggest strategies of 'Affirmative Action' to intentionally redress the balance. Proposals will be brought to General Assembly 2022.

10. What are other denominations saying and doing about these questions?

The Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) offered an apology in 2007; we have drawn heavily on this to help shape the wording of the proposed URC apology:

https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/366545/The_Apology.aspx

The BUGB always intended that the apology would be the start of an intentional journey towards racial justice across the Baptist Union family. Progress has been slow, but the commitment and the work continue.

The Methodist Church in Britain is just embarking on its own journey to engage specifically with the legacies of transatlantic slavery. They are very keen to learn from and draw on our work to date.

To a greater or lesser extent, all the mainstream churches have been addressing the issue of racial justice over many years. Since early 2021 – in the wake of COVID and the murder of George Floyd – this work has resumed greater focus. Two new ecumenical bodies have been formed (Racial Justice Advocacy Forum; Racial Justice Working Group) seeking to further the collective work towards racial justice, and to support the member churches in their respective journeys. The Racial Justice Advocacy Forum has a specific remit to advocate on the issue of reparations.

This document will be amended and updated as we receive further comments and queries in response to our work.

**The Legacies of Slavery Task Group
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