

URC 'LEGACIES OF SLAVERY' TASK GROUP
Consultation document for distribution to churches,
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We live in a multicultural, multiracial Britain. People hail Black footballers and athletes when they do something great for 'our' country. But those same people are often subject to racist abuse on sportsgrounds, through social media, on the streets and in shops. The same is true for Black people in the entertainment industry, who negotiate racism behind the scenes in their chosen fields. Black people who aren't celebrities may suffer even more immediately – discriminated against in jobs, pay, housing, and educational opportunities because of prejudice against the colour of their skin, the way they dress or how they speak, even though most are UK citizens who have lived and worked in this country all their lives. The hurt has always been there, but it has been aggravated in the past two years by the murder of George Floyd and the inequalities highlighted by the particular vulnerability to COVID of people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. We have seen the upsurge of the Black Lives Matter movement among both Black people and white people in response to these global dynamics.

Racism has deep roots in our society. Slavery, one might say, was the original sin: the forcible removal of some 3¼ million Africans in British ships across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and the southern parts of what became the United States. These enslaved people and their descendants were treated as essential labour in the cultivation of crops such as sugar, tobacco and cotton – which played a major role in Britain's commercial and industrial revolutions. The slave trade was abolished by Parliament in 1807, followed in 1833-8 by the abolition of slavery in Britain and the British Caribbean Territories – anniversaries that are widely celebrated in this country. Less familiar is the sequel. Slave-owners were granted £20 million as compensation for their loss of 'property' – equivalent to perhaps £340 billion as a proportion of government spending today. But not one of the 800,000 ex-slaves was compensated for their enforced hard work, the suppression of their freedom and that of their ancestors.

This glaring injustice has finally become a topic of public discussion in Britain. On 30 November 2021 the Prince of Wales, speaking on the eve of Barbados becoming a self-governing republic, used these blunt words: 'From the darkest days of our past, and the appalling atrocity of slavery, which forever stains our history, the people of this island forged their path with extraordinary fortitude.' Although the UK Government has ruled out any programme of reparations, such projects have been initiated by the institutional descendants of several prime movers in the British slave trade. These include Lloyds of London (who insured most of the voyages), some of the major banks (which provided credit to slave-traders) and the Universities of Glasgow, Liverpool and Bristol (cities that grew rich from the slave trade). And many local community groups are revealing how the profits and products of slavery became woven into the fabric of British life in the 18th and 19th centuries, not just for wealthy men but also for ordinary families through commodities such as sugar, tobacco and cotton.

Some may respond that the transatlantic slave trade happened a very long time ago, and no one alive today is responsible. But what Prince Charles called the 'appalling atrocity of slavery' stains our present as well as our past, living on in racist attitudes of mind. In Roman and Saxon times many people in Britain were slaves – the Domesday Book of 1086 classified around 10% of the population

as slaves – but the practice seems to have died out by 1400, especially after the Black Death. The transatlantic slave trade revived the institution of slavery within the British world but applied it almost entirely to Africans, marked out by the colour of their skin. This equation of slavery with race solidified a sense of superior status among whites – ‘Britons never will be slaves’, proclaimed Thomas Arne’s *Rule, Britannia!* (1740) – and this assumption of racial hierarchy became the norm elsewhere in the British Empire, even where slavery had not been practised, such as the Indian sub-continent. The idea of racial hierarchy, one might say, is the default which continues to shape every aspect of our world and our relationships today.

Saddest of all for us, racist assumptions also conditioned the Christianity of our forebears in the United Reformed Church. The URC, of course, was founded only in 1972, and none of its predecessor bodies were created until the end of the slavery era. It’s also true that many Dissenters took leading roles in the campaign to abolish slavery. But some profited from the ownership of slave ships (William Coward, a London merchant and patron of religious dissenters) or of slave plantations (William Alers Hankey, treasurer of the London Missionary Society for twenty years). The LMS focused on the saving of souls, rather than the welfare of the slaves, not least because missionaries were driven out of the Caribbean colonies if suspected of being troublemakers. And many Christians at home were willing to accept some of the compensation, even if they had scruples about the whole business. Their sense of morality (like ours, if we’re honest) was complex and flawed.

Although much about the history remains hazy, it’s clear that the URC (like other British institutions) is heir to a racist past that cannot fill us with pride. Most members of the URC have not thought much about the legacies of slavery – which have been whitewashed out of the familiar narrative of British history – but we are all implicated in the enduring culture of racism that those legacies fostered. George Floyd’s murder and the disproportionate impact of COVID on Black, Asian and ethnic minority communities have made us more aware of the need to act. Although we’re not responsible for the sins of our forebears centuries ago, we definitely are responsible for allowing them to poison our society in the 21st century.

That’s why the Task Group calls on General Assembly in July 2022 to make a Statement of Apology (for the original sin of enslavement) and of Confession (for the abiding sin of racism). It also calls on General Assembly to embark on a programme of ‘repairing justice’, both in the UK and in parts of the Atlantic world still scarred by the legacies of slavery. These acts should be regarded as the start of a journey for us all – part of our commitment to becoming an actively anti-racist church in God’s name. We ask congregations to consider the Task Group’s case, offering comments and, we pray, your warm support in preparation for the Assembly discussions.

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/domesday/world-of-domesday/order.htm>

<https://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/speech/speech-hrh-prince-wales-transition-barbados-republic>

<https://www.lloyds.com/news-and-insights/news/our-full-statement-on-the-lloyds-markets-role-in-the-slave-trade>

<https://www.lancasterslaveryfamilytrees.com/> - an example of a community-based research project

Apology and Confession by the United Reformed Church

We, the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church, are mindful of our own current history, that of our antecedent bodies, the scriptural and theological groundings of our Basis of Union, and of our many declarations and resolutions over the years related to justice and the embracing of the humanity of all people, everywhere.

As a Conciliar Church, we have listened to one another as we received the report of Mission Committee on the ongoing Legacies of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. We have heard the pain of sisters and brothers who have been hurt and are still being hurt today by its legacies and by the continuing scourge of racism. We have heard God in Christ speaking to us in what we believe to be a Kairos moment. We acknowledge our weakness, the ambiguities we embody, and yet, in a spirit of humility and vulnerability, we are urged on by a movement of God's Spirit, calling us to a journey of words and actions born out of what we have felt and heard, a commitment to a future built on equity, justice and love.

To this end, we, the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church, gathered here in Swanwick in the year 2022

- *humbly acknowledge our share in and benefit from our nation's participation, and that of our own antecedent bodies, in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and British Colonial slaveholding.*
- *acknowledge that we speak as those who have shared in and suffered from the legacies of slavery and its appalling consequences for God's world.*
- *offer our apology to God and to our sisters and brothers in Africa, the Caribbean, and their descendants, including those in our midst, for all that has created and still perpetuates such deep hurt, which originated from the horrors of slavery.*
- *collectively repent of the hurt caused by our Church and its antecedent bodies, the divisions we have created, our reluctance to face up to the sin of the past, our unwillingness to listen to the pain of our African and Caribbean sisters and brothers, and our silence in the face of racism and injustice today.*
- *admit that these sins are part of our continuing failure to see and hear God in all our neighbours, whoever they may be.*
- *commit ourselves, in a true spirit of repentance*
 - *to take what we have heard and learnt at this Assembly and share it widely across the whole of the URC and beyond,*
 - *to find constructive ways by which we can turn this apology and confession into concrete actions of 'repairing justice' and so contribute to the prophetic work of God's coming kingdom.*
 - *to continue working to promote racial justice as part of our Christian commitment to justice for all*

As we ask for forgiveness, we invite all of the United Reformed Church to recommit ourselves to walking together in the Spirit of Christ so that all peoples may be blessed, and God's creation healed.

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